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THE KING OF ALBERIA



THE
KING OF ALBERIA

A ROMANCE OF THE BALKANS

BY
LAURA DAINTRY

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET, W.C.
LONDON
1895

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THE KING OF ALBERIA



CHAPTER I

FREDEGONDE

"Thou hast great allies ;
Thy friends are exaltations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind . . .
High sacrifice, and labour without pause,
Even to the death, else wherefore should the eye
Of man converse with immortality?"

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

DAY spilt his life-blood in the reddened west. The lake's slow waters rippled red from the horizon. The western windows of Königslust let in the sunset's sanguine glare, faced, through the eastern windows, by a dim red rising moon.

At opposite ends of a saloon, visions of the vanquished sun and the victorious moon showed, pictures set in shadow. A dense hush dwelt there, the mysterious and sinister hush of disaster and suspense.

Through a shut door a sound pierced, a brief acute faint cry. The silence was startled by a nearer groan of answering agony. Against the shut door leaned a man, hardly distinguishable from the shadow ; he grasped the handle which he dared not turn, and, like a victim waiting for the next wrench of the rack, stood listening.

. . . Silence again, and silence doubly dense : silence intolerable. Before the man's eyes, open or shut fast against it, started out a single sight, with all his sick brain's ruthless iteration. A forest glade, between whose huge-armed trees a man and woman rode : she was as fair as the gold and rose of dawn which breaks upon a silver sea. They passed on wordless—life had love upon his lips instead of song. . . . A bird whirled up before the horses' feet. He saw her for a breath's time carried headlong on by hers, then thrown. . . .

Another moan through the shut door.

The man let go the handle, and clenched his hands upon his ears. He reeled, and muttered to himself persistently, "I shall go mad!—I shall go mad! . . ."

Suddenly the voice within wailed, "Waldemar ! Where is he? Waldemar !"

The man turned like a tiger, bounded to the door, and burst into the room. . . . His step grew slow as he advanced ; his limbs shook as he saw the shape inert on a rich bed. Towards him two physicians came, in long black priestly robes.

"Your Majesty," the elder said, "all we can do is done."

He still looked towards the bed, and not at these ; then with a gesture ordered privacy. As the last attendant disappeared, he walked like a somnambulist to where she lay.

She saw him come, and tried to lift her hand in welcome, but it fell back nerveless. Their eyes met in a gaze of comprehension tragic as farewell.

"Fredegonde . . ."

His tone was a protest, an appeal ; he sought to break the spell of silence. It seemed to him that in this gulf of stillness life with all its freight was foundering.

"Fredegonde, I came to ask you how you are—

whether you suffer—whether—” He was kneeling: his voice, suppressed and strenuous, broke. He began to kiss her hands with passion.

She divined the dread that sought to spend itself in these caresses. She supplied the sentence he had left unsaid.

“Waldemar, remember love, which is immortal. There is no death for those who love.”

The King rose, as a man struck to his knees in battle rises, dizzy with the blow.

“Then . . . you . . . ” He trembled bodily. “You shall not leave me,” he resumed, with calm. “It cannot be. I will go with you.”

She met his look, in which a sombre triumph mixed with passion: from her eyes, at his words, leapt responsive a lightning of love. Then gathering her utmost strength, “No,” she said, “Waldemar—no, no . . . ”

“No?” he repeated. “Are you the woman I adore, who loves me, Fredegonde? Are you my soul’s best part, my sweeter self, and yet would leave me here behind you? We have lived and loved together; let us die together, now that life has done with joy. I say, ‘Together let us challenge the Unknown!’—and you refuse?”

She sought to speak: emotion and exhaustion stilled her.

“Fredegonde,” he murmured, with a smile such as she alone, perhaps, ever evoked, “is it that you fear the end for me, while you wait for it yourself with calm?”

His look and smile, courageous, compassionate, caressing, gave her too keen a pain. Forgetting the high promptings which forced her to refuse what, next to life itself, she wished for most, she remembered only their parting—“the end,” the abhorred inevitable—and wept, tears which her pale hands no longer had the strength to dry.

“Ah! you regret! We will leave it together, this

world which I hate and you abandon. Together, Fredegonde—forever together!”

He knelt again, throwing his arm across her breast. In their kiss was the delirium of this flight, the passionate vertigo of this escape into immensity. . . . He felt her repulse him.

“Waldemar, we dream, we love—but for how long? It is coming, at every kiss another step: I am afraid! Oh, I love you too much not to fear it. . . . I tell you I must go alone—alone! I tell you it must part us!”

“When I swear that it shall not?”

“Alas, my beloved!”

The King’s hand went to his brows.

“I feel one of those frightful hours coming on me . . . ”

“Waldemar, have pity! Be calm!—O God! how can I leave him like this?”

“You shall not leave me.”

Their eyes met in a look profound as love, sombre as death. She summoned all her strength, and spoke again.

“If you were dying, I might say, ‘I follow’—if you were dead, I too might die, because you are my universe. No one else claims my life. No one else claims my care. In leaving existence I should break no vows, neglect no obligations. But you! What of the throne you have just mounted, the oaths you have just taken? What of your people, who are also your children?—your kingdom, which is also your country?”

He stood before her, arms crossed and head bowed—a noble head, whose fair and spiritual beauty betrayed a trace of that poetic mysticism which marks the German race’s highest types. She, turned towards him, raised a little on her arm, poured into this argument her life’s last force, watching with kindling but despairing eyes her words’ effect on his decision.

He looked up.

"I shall not be missed. My reign has only just begun: I have marked out no new paths of policy. My father, the experienced ruler, they may miss; not I, whom any other can replace."

"Waldemar, give me your hands, sit here beside me. Ah! these last hours and tears, these last caresses! . . . Is it not for you, my best-beloved, to royally sustain your royal part? Once I hoped in the future to hear it said of you, 'His country is his debtor.' It seems to me that a king has the power, if he will, to be the greatest of all patriots."

"Fredegonde, I hear you, and I love my country—this strange adopted country where my boyhood has been passed, and where we have been happy. . . . But why I?—I, of all others? The part of a king is sad to play; I was not planned for it. Instead of the crown reflecting its dignity upon its servants, it seems to absorb all theirs. Instead of seeing men who love their country's glory round me, I see men who live but for their own. They cringe, they scheme, they pander, lie, betray: this one wants a decoration, that one wants a place. And this perpetual abasement and intrigue is to gain what seems to me not worth a para!"

"Best-beloved, your arguments but turn against yourself. Is it not here, where all are egotists, that one should sacrifice himself to save his country? I know your weariness; I share your pain; but beyond it all I see, like a white dawn, reunion, peace . . . Think! the young nation lies between two despotisms: Turkey and Russia, the old and the new. Your father's work must be carried on, or all that has been done in these twelve years will be in vain. After their centuries of slavery and strife, it is your privilege to lead the people on to light and freedom.

Waldemar, the nation's fate is in your hands ; if you die now, you kill your kingdom !”

“And if I live?” A ghastly change came livid on his face. “I may go mad. . . .”

There was a long and heavy silence : he seemed to see the spectre of his race upon its way. Madness ! the incubus of all the royal houses of the civilised and Christian world ; the taint of all the royal blood of Europe ; the scourge of Nature on unnatural pride, which, seeking to stand high above her laws, falls doubly low ; the writing on the wall, whose blazing letters will be seen at last, but seen too late. . . . Down Fredegonde's pale face two tears rolled, the only answer she could make. The King roused, sombre-eyed, and spoke again.

“Say that it spares me, and I work out my release: I shall leave behind me no successor. You know my resolve: I will not transmit this curse to children of mine. . . . If I dared to, I should feel I had their blood upon my head to all eternity. . . . Compare a man's few waning years with a nation's centuries ! When I am gone—what then ? Will anything have changed ? Russia will still be on Alberia's track ; yes, and still as hungry as her wolves—”

“But you will have done your duty ; you will have earned your rest.”

“Fredegonde, you have no mercy !”

“No, or I should have sweet mercy on myself”—The last word was a murmur ; she had swooned.

The King poured cordial between her lips, and stared into her unresponsive eyes.

“Death is like this,” he muttered. “This is how I shall look at her when it is over. This is how I shall remember her. This is the pain that will devour me. . . . Self-sacrifice and patriotism—well enough, but before that I shall have gone mad. . . .”

“Waldemar . . . what is it you say ? . . .”

"God's mercy! I say, I suffer too much! I say, let me come! I say, you will leave behind you a madman, not a king, to play the patriot!"

She lifted her hand in dumb appeal. He branded on it frenzied kisses; and then, collapsing, leaned his forehead on its palm.

"Will it never help and comfort me again?" he thought. She heard him groan.

There was long silence in the room—the silence death and peace share with despair. Night had fallen; the lake become a shield of shadow, not a field of blood. The risen moon stood wan above the hills, like the spectre of all the trouble of all time.

"Waldemar," murmured the dying woman, laying the hand he was not holding on his hair, "has not our love been comradeship and confidence?"

"'Has been!' The past already! Fredegonde!"

"No, not the past; the future. I think our souls are wed too close for even death to sunder. Nothing can send me very far from you. Listen: I will be with you when you suffer; I will be near when you despair. A day of pain seems everlasting if one does not dream of beautiful to-morrow; a life's unrest seems but a day's, if one looks to the eternal calm. And afterward, when pain is past and work is done, we—"

"— May find that the soul dies with the body!"

"Cruel! when I . . ."

"Yes, cruel. Suffer, and understand my pain! I have always doubted: now I fear—with all the pangs of hell! What if I, a shadow, mourn a shadow, in an unsubstantial dream? To die with you! . . . Then at least we should have touched the truth together; dreamed out the dream, or passed beyond dreams. How can I let you go—not only beyond sight and sound, but even soul's embrace—into that impenetrable night, and wide upon that chartless sea!

Fredegonde, how can I let you go, thinking as I do, feeling we may never meet again—”

“We must; we will!”

“Must? What are must or will of ours against one of nature’s ordinances?”

“Ah, dear, you dread, but do not know. My faith—”

“May faith not fool you? . . . Fredegonde, what in all this jarring world is left to me when you are gone? Inexorable duty; deadly doubt; alternate torments for my days and nights, and the thought of madness for a pastime!” The King laughed loudly, and tossed away her hand. “Who cares? A hundred years hence, as they say, it will be the same to all of us. I shall have passed out where you are going now: to nothingness, or dull oblivion in another state, to heaven with, or hell without you. . . . Fredegonde, my wife, my goddess!—though we love!—”

She felt the fervour of his hands and lips, while passion wrestled giantlike with reason.

“Have pity, Waldemar! Duty forbids, not I—because your country calls you!”

At the instant there was a knocking on the door.

“Sire, a courier from the capital,” the elder of the two physicians said.

Waldemar sprang to his feet; her eyes replied to his eyes’ portent.

“Let him deliver his despatches here, Gadatz.”

The King of Alberia entered the saloon, and gave audience to the messenger. . . . Ten minutes later he returned, pale as the dying woman on the bed.

“There has been an outbreak on the Turkish frontier. They call me to Zarilov. . . .”

To his stunned stare she answered one long gaze of infinite farewell.

“It is the summons of your country; go.”

"But you—?"

"My soul goes with you."

He knelt. She laid her hands on his bowed head in final benediction.

"Fredegonde!"

"Waldemar. . . ."

His eyes met her despairing eyes, his lips her lips. . . . This look and kiss seemed to convey their last farewell of soul and body.

. . . He felt her arms relax, her lips grow cold. She had swooned again; he laid her back with pain and death upon her face.

The King, as he turned away, cast on her the look of the damned who dream of heaven.

CHAPTER II

WALDEMAR

" Cuando entre al vano estrepito dal mundo
La melodia de tu nombre suena."

RAMON URIARTE.

A TRAVELLING carriage, drawn by galloping horses, plunged down a defile. Emerging, it followed the road, here hewn in the sheer rock, across the mountain's face. A thousand feet below lay the Königsee; a thousand feet above rose Königslust.

The King of Alberia was on his way.

A shock, a shout: the vehicle stopped; one of the horses was down. The King descended, watched the brute, struggling to its feet, stand quivering, and wondered why it had not rolled towards the verge and over, dragging him, its fellows, and the carriage on a final headlong journey to the lake. With a pang of rage fiercer than a curse, he looked once upward and re-entered.

The four black horses, swift as the Wild Huntsman, tore through the echoing region of hills. Their hoof-beat startled the great night calm; they dashed across spaces made silver with moonlight, sudden and spectral as shadow steeds.

"I should pursue her like this through all time," thought the King, "if I let her go." The horses' gallop began to trample a word out: "Forever—forever—forever!"

"Faster!" shouted the King. "On! faster!" He wished to escape from the sound and the thought.

They crossed a light bridge in the spray of a cataract, leaping thunderous, rainbow-crowned; they forded a slow-flowing river where moonlight spanned it with unsubstantial gold. Owls, strong-winged, on nocturnal errands, hovered and hooted and stared as they passed; from farther forests the howl of wolves came, famished but cowardly, hanging behind.

The stars marked midnight; the moon, at her highest, hung like a lamp in the dome of heaven. The horses were checked beside lines of steel which shone to the shadowy mouth of a gorge. Waldemar entered the waiting train of a single sumptuous car.

It moved away stealthily, shrieking no signal, but cries of disaster followed it. It left a man ground to death on its track as it vanished in the ravine. The King heard the shout, not of salute, and, leaning out, looked back. A head bounded ball-like between the wheels of the car, and rolled away. . . . When he thought at last of checking the train, it had thundered forward some miles.

"Accursed journey!" muttered the King. "Delayed—blood-stained—accursed!"

The mountain-ranges were falling behind, like laggard bands of Titans. No longer the chasm, the cataract, the summit, but peaceful fields and farms. Waldemar watched with envy and fury these homesteads lying asleep. Here love and happiness sheltered like eave-building swallows; life passed secure and serene. . . . He cursed the cynical fate which, seeming to lavish, cancelled, and left him exalted, envied, and beggared.

The weary white moon had done her vigil; stars paled; the view was a landscape of shadows. Night's reign had ended, day's not begun; mystery held inter-



regnum. The King, with sleepless and bloodshot eyes, looked out on a vaporous realm. The river which he had forded near its source in the mountains, swept into sight again, glassy under the moon's last light. Mists rose off it in silvery spirals, to mix with the hovering mist of the marshlands, where, dim balls of ambiguous fire, will-o'-the-wisps were at play. A few leagues lower the river flowed through the capital of Alberia. Waldemar, listening to the engine's throb as it ran its race with time, remarked a kindling of the eastern sky.

"Dawn already! perhaps dawn of the last day she will see." . . . Still staring at it, his thoughts with the woman he loved and was losing, he noticed a curious fluctuation of the glow. "But is it dawn—?"

He let down the car's double window and watched. There seemed to hang above the light a cloud which sullenly reflected it. The train was speeding sixty miles an hour: the view grew momentarily more definite. The radiance seemed to rise, a steam of light. The cloud was smoke; the light was fire.

"Either the forests behind, or the city!—" The railroad curved with the river; the train rushed in sight. "God's mercy!" breathed the King.

Zarilov lay on the lower slopes of a group of wood-crowned hills. White, save where the grim old Turkish fortress hugged its flank, and reaching to the waters of the green-waved Save, the beautiful city resembled a beautiful woman bathing her feet. Now the water ran flame and blood, the city lay lurid, the hill behind it rose in a cone of fire. . . . A wind blew the conflagration back from instead of over the town. The forests were burning, and roared aloft in volumes of flame-forked smoke. Waldemar watched neither forest nor city; he looked towards the grand and solitary pile which capped the hill. Not kindled yet, though there spread between it and his sight a gleam-

ing veil ; it was besieged, and above it the flag of the victor already shone.

He checked the train.

A line of windows at the black bulk's base glowed orange, one by one. The huge arched portal vomited smoke, then fire. Higher windows lit, and dimmed, and issued stealthy climbing flames. Shining serpents seemed to hang and wind and writhe on the façade. A dense cloud crowned the castle, suddenly splendid with an aigrette of sparks.

"Ruin," muttered Waldemar, "ruin ! Death and war and fire !"

The incandescent walls enclosed a yellow devil's-bath of flame. The roof fell, sending a gold column to the zenith : vacancy replaced the glowing windows.

"The home she loved. . . . Those rooms were hers. . . ."

The summit was conquered ; the forest-fires, converging, hid it with walls of flame. Soaring upward, their barren and terrific aspiration resembled that of vast frustrated hope. The King struck the signal, grinding his teeth. The train dashed into the city.

Through the glazed arch of the railway station's roof the fire's reflection showed like daylight. Fear disturbed the faces of the court officials gathered to receive the King : only the pale mask of the Premier, behind which he had watched the world for forty years, remained impassive. He came to secure a five minutes' private hearing during the King's drive to the palace. Once there, the Council of ministers, already assembled, awaited them.

The first thing Waldemar's eyes marked, as the train's stoppage roused him, was Fokshany's figure. Tall, meagre, slightly bent, though rather by diplomacy's perpetual bow than statecraft's perpetual burden, with a face in whose ivory smoothness and pallor a few deep lines seemed carved, the Premier was

not to be overlooked, and not to be forgotten. He remembered nothing which it was politic to forget, and forgot nothing which it was politic to remember. His vigilant repose revealed the man whose strength lies in knowing how to wait. The King met his eyes with a shock. Steadfast and indecipherable, their lower and upper lids were equally jealous of disclosing them; it was said that no one had ever succeeded in determining their colour. The King for a second failed to sign his recognition. Fokshany stood before him the embodiment of Duty, of the Future, of the Actual.

Waldemar conquered a singular impulse—to fly, returning swifter than he had come; to elude them forever—and descended, entering his carriage, where he bade Fokshany follow.

“The situation, Count?” he inquired. “Has it changed?”

“Not materially, your Majesty. It is critical, considering the attitude of Russia, but treated with policy—”

“And your policy?” said Waldemar, cutting short the preface. Fokshany knew when to be brief.

“The Council, to a man, is set on war. Sire, there must be peace.”

The King did not answer; he seemed sunk in thought. The fire’s pervading glare gave all it touched a ghastly hue. Fokshany wondered, as he watched, if it were this that altered the aspect of his master. Waldemar was silent, looking down; then—

“Peace . . .” he muttered. “Peace!” and threw his head back with the laughter of despair. Fokshany scrutinised his pale, harmonious profile, baffled by its symmetry.

“Will he die, like his father, in council,” thought the Premier, “or like his father’s father, in a mad-house?” Weighing the chances, he let some minutes

pass. Then, as he knew they neared the palace, "Your Majesty—" he said, intending to recall the King respectfully to the unsettled question. "Sire, your sanction to the policy of peace—"

Waldemar roused.

"What do you say?"

"May I hope for your Majesty's support in the measures I desire to—"

"Yes," interrupted the King. "But after that I return. Let there be no pretext for delaying me, Fokshany."

The minister, astounded, received the shock and Waldemar's commanding glance impassively. He knew that the King's morganatic wife was in danger, as an express had arrived some hours before to summon consulting physicians, but regarded her probable death with the double cynicism of diplomat and *roué*. That such an event could distract the attention of Waldemar from urgent state affairs had not occurred to him. At the same time he saw an opportunity, and seized it with the malice clashing temperaments engender.

"Your Majesty will pardon my suggesting that your absence at this crisis is unfortunate."

"I leave you in control, Count."

"I am honoured by your Majesty's confidence, which I should not deserve if I did not make an effort to persuade you to remain."

"Useless."

"In that case, sire, I will do my best; but the responsibility is heavy, and my control, unhappily, does not extend to public opinion."

"You are bold for a courtier, Fokshany," said the King.

"No courtier, but your humble and faithful servant, sire, whose duty is to indicate the danger of arousing, at this crisis, the people's jealousy."

"Ah!"

"Your Majesty's experience on the throne, though short, must have shown you something of popular unreason. The more insignificant they think its object, the more violent their jealousy. That a woman's whim, which your Majesty graciously condescends to humour, should outweigh—"

"Count Fokshany, the subject is closed. You have amply done your duty to your conscience; it remains for you to do your duty to your King."

The Premier bowed.

"May I hope that a loyal desire for your Majesty's welfare will be my excuse?"

At the moment the carriage stopped; the King's reply, made as he left it, was inaudible.

Fokshany was satisfied with his experiment; he had been perfectly aware that his method of persuasion would confirm the King's resolve. The Premier was strong enough to bear the brunt of transient royal anger for this stake, and also divined that Waldemar would later on account his temerity devotion. Since Waldemar's morganatic marriage and refusal to contract a higher alliance with a view to strengthening the dynasty, Fokshany had been secretly antagonistic to him; and, had Russia's Panslavist movement been less dangerous to the peace of all the Balkan States, besides a revival of feeling for the race of Vlastimir, the Haiduk chief, who had led the country on to liberty against the Turks, being possible, the Premier might even have countenanced the deposition of a ruler, childless and unpopular, whose tendency to madness would have furnished pretext and excuse for such a step. As it was, Fokshany took every opportunity to prejudice the young King with his people, never certain that the wheel's turn might not make his master madman, himself regent; or render a *coup d'état* needful, on this pretext, by which they could

be thus proclaimed. Fokshany was conservative by nature, but he knew the value of adaptability in countries where the political stage shows every day fresh changes. Besides, between him and Waldemar existed the bottomless and unbridgeable gulf which divides idealist and materialist. As the Premier stooped in descending from the carriage, his ivory mask showed a smile.

Night passed; dawn passed; morning passed; and the debate behind locked doors continued. Silence fell in the palace, as if its occupants held their breaths to hear. Telegrams in cipher were constantly received. A messenger from the frontier arrived, and was admitted. During his detention curiosity increased; on reappearing he was questioned. He refused to speak of the crisis, but answered their inquiries for the King.

"His Majesty said nothing—it was the Count who spoke—but sat staring straight before him, like a man who looks ruin in the face."

This filtered quickly through the palace to the city, spreading consternation as it went. Time lagged on unhelped by further rumour. It was noon in Zarilov.

Not only the royal household, but the whole population of the capital, now seemed to watch for the sitting's termination. The ague of violent excitement spread from the locked cabinet throughout Alberia. War was thought imminent—war with the hated and hereditary foe: soldiers welcomed it; young men toasted it; wise men feared it; merchants trembled for their trade, women for their lovers, brothers, sons, cowards for their lives, and patriots for their country.

Another hour passed.

At one o'clock the coming of a second courier sent a whisper abroad that gathered to a whirlwind: the Turks were marching on the capital! . . . The people

crowded the square before the palace, staring at the dumb and vast façade behind which their fate was being balanced.

Suddenly a roar of consternation rose. The King of Alberia, unaccompanied, had left the menaced city.

Fokshany, smiling at his subtlety's success, was not aware that during the last moments of his drive with Waldemar, his life had been in peril. The singular sense of being hunted down, which the minister's coming had impressed upon the King, mixed with irritation at Fokshany's remonstrances, and culminated in a silent fury nearly fatal when he spoke of Fredegonde. Waldemar precipitately left the carriage; reason enough remained to show him that he had reached the brink of madness.

He traversed the palace, entered the council-chamber, took his place and opened the session, hardly aware of what he did. Fokshany's words had accomplished more than the Premier suspected or desired. They voiced the verdict of the world upon his love, and, contrasting with the world's hypocrisy the heroism of her whom it contemned, he felt despair. Tortured with scorn, pain, weariness, and doubt, he remembered the refuge she forbade him.

Fokshany began to speak in his tranquil musical and penetrating voice. Waldemar watched him, thinking of his allusion to Fredegonde. If she had been Queen, and dying . . . he could conjecture the difference in its tone. Yes, that serene voice was an echo of the world's: the canting world which, mouthing of morality, confessed her wife, yet gave him right to take another wife; the cringing world which would not howl "Adulterer!" as to any other man, because his blood was royal blood; the mole-blind world whose morality would sanction his perpetuation of a tainted race; the vampire-world which,

gorged upon his life-blood of self-sacrifice, would leave him in oblivion to rot ; the world for which she bade him live and die.

Fokshany paused, and turned towards him.

"Has my plan of action your Majesty's support?"

"Yes," answered Waldemar. The sound of other voices struck his ear from time to time, but none carried more meaning to his brain than had the half-heard question of the Premier.

He had always been at odds with life: why live? . . . The thought recurred like a refrain. At odds with life: its dignities were shackles; its adulation, falsity; its favours, burdens; and the supreme gift time had given, eternity already claimed. Why not escape? She had forbidden in the name of duty: she would welcome and pardon in the name of love. Why not—

"It is a question of expediency," said Fokshany. The phrase reached Waldemar.

Why not seek peace and world-oblivion?—here were men fitter for the times than he. Skilled in the science of procrastination, the art of evasion, the trick of flattery; deciding from the standpoint of "expediency" all questions, whether of feeling or of honour; these and such as these could govern, where he would break the sceptre in despair. Sons of the world, let them serve it, nerved by its praises, prizing its rewards; he, loving neither, would depart un-missed. But duty . . .

The King put his hand to his brows, where a pang like the stab of steel had come and gone. The ministers, engrossed with their dispute, did not see him pale and frown as if bewildered. He could not recall the thought pain had expelled. At this time the first courier was admitted.

Waldemar felt a strained stupor succeeding the emotions which had been perturbing him. His mind

was like ocean after storm, still troubled to the depths and floating goalless wreckage. Fokshany appealed to him several times, to fix attention on his absent and monosyllabic answers. He was hardly aware of these questions: a single idea had taken hold of him.

"She is dying," he repeated to himself, "she is dying; and before I can reach her—before I can reach her . . . it will have overtaken me."

He looked about him as the condemned might look, the block before, the guard behind him. He knew that within a few hours he would have passed beyond his own control.

The discussion of measures went on: Fokshany had secured a body of supporters. Those who held out, however, did so obstinately. Fresh despatches were awaited. A new thought, like a shape evolved from chaos, formed in Waldemar's mind.

"I must get back to her," he muttered to himself, with the glance about him of a captive. He was abstracted in a dream of this return,—the vision of their reunion in death; the mirage of her recovery; the sense of existence his without her,—when Fokshany's voice aroused him.

"Duty?" said the Premier. "Merely a word, like good or evil, invented to define the indefinable. A conjuring-phrase which makes one-half the world the victims of the other half."

Duty!—the lost thought was recalled. Fokshany's satire reached him like a blow. Duty, a sense of which had conquered his reluctance to succeed to his father's responsibilities; duty, which extorted the oaths that made him king; duty, in whose name she sent him from her now; duty, to which she meant to dedicate her lonely death, his lonely life. . . . He cursed the name as if it were a living foe's: he had obeyed it long enough.

As he rose to leave the Council, the second courier arrived. The King paused, received his despatches, read them, and passed them to the Premier.

"I approve your contemplated measures, Count Fokshany," he said, with a look part weariness, part exultation. "The situation has bettered, and I leave the guidance of Alberia in your hands."

Fokshany pondered this, but did not divine in it his master's leavetaking. The King, while the Council lingeringly dispersed, plumbed the profounds of peace: he had escaped the fret of life, the pain of parting, the conflicts of conscience, in a last resolve. He was returning to die.

He glanced, as his train rushed past, at the hill on whose crest had stood the home of Fredegonde. The forest fires were burning down in the waste of their own desolation. Waldemar smiled. He was thinking:

"Escape—beyond recapture or reminder!"

The fields and their guardian homesteads no longer mocked him with dreams of unreachable peace. He examined the vial of prussic acid he carried: to inhale the poison once was death. He smiled again, looking from this to the calm landscape, and back to the glass-bubble lying in his palm, with its secret of ultimate sleep.

At sunset the sentinel hills appeared, and night fell, solemn with stars. A great meteor rushed across the heavens, shedding blazing fragments in its course, and, slowly deadening into the night sky, lost its extinct bulk on the dark.

"Like a lonely soul departing," muttered Waldemar. "Fredegonde, we go together!"

. . . At the door of her chamber, a physician, leaving it, met him about to enter. His asking gesture was answered slowly:

"Sire, she is dead."

CHAPTER III

LOVE AND DEATH

"Leaves have their time to fall,
And flowers to wither in the north wind's breath,
And stars to set, but all,
Thou hast all seasons for thine own, O Death!"
FELICIA HEMANS.

SHE lay where he had left her, and the waning moon shone full upon her bed. Tapers were burning at her head and feet: light seemed to centre on her still recumbent shape, and left the chamber walled and ceiled with shadow. . . . Walde-mar paused as if he waited for the welcome of her warm outstretching arms. Closed eyes, crossed hands, and limbs composed in the ghastly decorum of death. He reached her with a groan:

"Fredegonde!"

The invocation recoiled upon him from her beauty's inscrutable, inexorable calm. Despair and death in naked terror overwhelmed him. He swooned, falling heavily.

. . . The King, reviving, found himself supported on a couch, his old physician's hand upon his pulse, a dozen courtiers about him, a chamberlain directing several active pages near, some women whispering in the background. The chamber of death was invaded; lamps outshone the tapers and the moon; faces wore looks of curiosity, perplexity, alarm, but not of pity, love, or awe. In the midst of this tumult showed

the silent profile of the dead woman lying on her bed.

Waldemar rose, only to drop back senseless before Gadatz had finished his remonstrance. Attendants and courtiers, crowding close, were repulsed by the physician's cry for air. A couple of pages, holding each other by the hand, looked from the King to Fredegonde: just within the gates of life, they caught with wonder this echo of romance; the future widened in the magic terror of this dream of love and death half understood. A woman glided near the bed, and gazed there with exultant eyes: she, fair-skinned too and golden-haired, had envied the beloved of the King. A girl looked after her, thinking of the loved one she had stolen from her netted in that golden snare, and while the blonde woman stood envious of the dead, the girl's heart, sick to death, was envying her. As Waldemar roused again, a young noble, mingling with the group of women, murmured some heedless jest, and smiled as they suppressed their laughter. Ilona was beckoning a friend to join her by the bed, which she now leaned over. The King with a single movement gained his feet.

"Let all retire! and those who dared jest *here* leave my presence now for the last time!"

He saw them start and stare; some flushed, some shrank; a dead hush fell. Then, heads averted, noiselessly stepping, and bearing with them the lamps they had brought, they trooped away, dumb as a train of shadows, leaving him by his dead.

He looked about him. The tapers burned steadily, six at her head and six at her feet. The shadows had grown profound again, cleft where the shaft of moonlight fell upon her. It seemed to him that she looked like a bride asleep on her nuptial bed. The coverlet gleamed, white satin run with gold; the sheets were woven silk; lace filmed its hueless cob-

webs on her flesh. Against the moon-illuminated fabrics' pallor, her face shone superlatively pale. . . . He approached and sat down beside the bed. The irony of the suggestion pierced him: a bride, when the beloved for the first time found no welcome, no response! . . . He watched her, the torpor of despair invading him.

"A little longer," he said to her, "a little longer, and we might have gone together! Could you not wait for me?" He was thinking of the speeches of Fokshany in the Council, and of the scene just past. "What have you left me to?" he cried, in the weakness of consuming pain. No vindication passed her death-sealed lips, but there brooded on her face the shadow of supreme self-sacrifice. "I forgot . . ." he muttered dully. "Forgive me—I forgot." He spoke as a rack-wrenched wretch, almost past pain, might do under a last strain of the pulleys. Then, kneeling down, his arms about her, he laid his head upon her breast.

. . . Few slept that night in Königslust. Gadatz, who had been the King's tutor throughout boyhood, forming his mind in the liberal mould so adverse to the maxims of Fokshany, and who, remaining near him as physician, though unwilling to accept any weightier office in the State, was his trusted councillor and friend, sat watching in an anteroom; those on whom the anger of the King had fallen brooded over coming exile from the court; attendants, restless with curiosity, gathered in wakeful groups. Ilona, lingering, sleep-overtaken, reposed with feline grace in a fauteuil. She was watched with aching eyes by the girl she had supplanted, who saw that her lover watched her too. On a tiger-skin lay the young twin pages, asleep in each other's arms: they dreamed of beauty which death could pale, and kings whose sway grief stood beyond. But through the whole

night's vigil no sound from the chamber of the dead was heard.

"Well might there be," it was muttered, "two corpses there instead of one."

Waldemar roused from memories of their passion, chilled to the brain by the coldness of her breast. He shuddered on recognising this, and chafed her frozen flesh with a fury of caresses. The moon was declining, wan and distorted: to Waldemar, looking in agony upward, it seemed a face ravaged by death. His gaze, reluctant, despairing, returned to the face upon the bed. . . . The moon set; the stars set; silvery shadows showed eastward, smoke of the torches of dawn. The tapers slowly burned down all together and went out.

Waldemar passed the night-hours like a man in a trance or a dream. Blindly enduring, he suffered alternately torments of fire and of ice. Memories haunted him, vivid, voluptuous; scenes of the passionate past recurred: he stood in a magical Hall of Echoes, where every echo seemed the voice it mocked. Then, through some flaw in each illusion drove the shattering spear of truth: he found himself confronted with the breathless bloodless stirless symbol of his loss. Sometimes it seemed the living being he had loved, asleep, not dead; sometimes the scabbard of a sword whose blade was rust; sometimes the alabaster of a lamp whose light was set amongst the stars. As he looked at her beautiful body on its bed of silk, he thought of the earth awaiting it.

"No!" he would mutter, staring about. "No, not that. No—no! . . ." Like one whose delirium shows him alternately faces of fabulous fairness and skulls, he turned from the richest memories of their love to the thought, "What shall be done with what was she?"

The first light glimmered coldly on the old phy-

sician's face where he sat uneasily asleep. He started up to find the King before him. Waldemar gave him some instructions in a dull and monotonous voice.

"Materials must be sent for, preparations made," said Gadatz, with a look and tone of deep solicitude. "It will be hours before we can arrange—"

"When you are ready, come to me," said Waldemar, returning. A new vigil began.

Gadatz's appearance roused the sleepers and the household for the day. When it was known that the King meant to continue watching, they made haste to breakfast. His decision was the topic of the hour, and was as variously canvassed as the latest scandal or the newest play in the next great capital, Vienna.

"Supremely poetic!" murmured blonde Ilona, gazing past the lover she had won for a caprice. "You—" she turned to him, "you are not capable, Arseni, of such a thing as that."

He made no answer; his impotent jealousy had long divined her passion for the King. Her rival, haggard with sleeplessness and sorrow, thought:

"I would die a thousand deaths to be loved like Fredegonde!"

The noble whose jest had caused his exile muttered to one who was about to leave the castle, like himself:

"They called his grandfather 'Max the Mad': it must be in the blood!"

The little pages whispered together.

"No one seems to care."

"But he does. If only it were not the King, I would try to comfort him!"

When it was noon, Gadatz, bringing a flask of cordial, and alone, ventured to knock upon the door.

"Sire, your commands are being carried out," he said, searching the King's face with his anxious eyes, which knew its every variation. "Meanwhile you

must consent—for my sake, Waldemar!—to take some food, at least some wine.”

Before he could conclude, the King had turned away, and he confronted a closed door. Gadatz thought of Waldemar’s accustomed gracious ways, saw the madness-spectre plainer, and returned to his post, his white head bowed upon his breast. He loved the King.

Waldemar resumed his place beside the bed. He fixed his strained and bloodshot eyes upon her face with new despair. Now that the beautiful eidolon was passing from him, it seemed as if she died again.

“And when all this is over . . . when everything is done . . . when I return . . .”

He dared not follow the thought further. The future’s loneliness assailed him, like the frozen wind that meets a traveller about to reach the polar circle. . . . Suddenly a clock struck: one—two—three. They must have just remembered to rewind it. The strokes made him start like a man stabbed; the tension of his nerves was near its limit. Half the afternoon had passed, then, since Gadatz’s coming to the door. Three hours had departed like a minute under the engrossing torture of one thought!

Waldemar looked about with hunted eyes. They must be nearly ready now. His faculties, their balance tottering, were centred upon listening for a step. . . . Unwarned by one, he heard Gadatz’s knock. Instead of answering it, he looked at her. When it was repeated, he faced about as if to defy all who might enter. The old man grew alarmed, and turned the handle: the King sprang forward to the opening door, and furiously confronted him.

“Your Majesty’s wishes are fulfilled, and at what time you think—”

“Begone!” exclaimed Waldemar. “Begone!”

"Sire, if I offend you—"

"Back! Her body's mine! Back, I say!—a step more, and I'll kill you!"

The old man, trembling but firm-fronted, retired before the madman's eye. As he sank into a chair, he heard the door shut, and a key turn in the lock.

Waldemar approached the bed, and fixed upon her face a gaze of agony and passion.

"They want to rob me," he repeated, low. "They want to rob me of you, Fredegonde. Stay with me. . . . Stay with me: I love you. . . . Stay with me, I say—they shall not take you!"

. . . Suddenly a change occurred: he smiled.

"When do they tell you you can ride with me again? Autumn's coming—summer's nearly gone: we want one more ramble while the leaves are green—

"But she is dead! . . ."

A space of stupor followed this, from which he abruptly roused.

"They must be ready," he muttered. "Yes, the sun is going down: they must be ready. . . . I cannot bear to see them come in here!—I'll leave her first. . . . Good-bye!—good-bye! . . ."

Gadatz, still faithful to his post, saw the door from which he had been turned reopen. The King came out with the hopeless lagging footstep of old age.

The last fires had faded from the west, and moonless night had fallen. In the great hall of Königslust the courtiers and household officers were assembled; and outside, bareheaded, every member of the lower orders of retainers stood. There was silence. They were waiting.

. . . A moment's murmur. Garmented in white, amongst white flowers, on a white-hung bier, the body of Fredegonde was borne down the black marble staircase at the huge hall's end. As it

approached the open doors, the King advanced to meet it. The bearers, unpausing, passed him with their measured and melancholy tread. He turned, and the dead and the mourner crossed the threshold into the night.

Those in the hall, forbidden to follow, crowded the windows as the doors swung to : they regarded the scene as a singular play to be presented only once. This superficial attention was abruptly startled into awe. The Alberian death-wail uplifted, and sharpened in soaring, and hung in anguish at its height ; then, like hope's expiring sigh, it faltered downward and fell mute. . . . When they rallied from the shock which gave them for the first time a sense of being actors in the tragedy they watched, they could see only shadowy dispersing figures, the flare of torches carried in the distance, and mid-way, like a silhouette, the mounted figure of the King.

The mountain, greatest of a brotherhood of hills whose fronts were glassed forever in the lake, reared half its height above Königslust. Towards the summit crept lights which the night-hunting owls saw like larger glow-worms through the leaves, but which in bare spaces smoked ruddily, torchwise, showing a horseman riding his horse, and a woman lying on her bier.

. . . The horse reared and snorted : he suddenly found his feet on the edge of a chasm. On either side stretched a level space, and the fallen trunk of a lightning-blasted tree alone bridged the abyss. Waldemar checked the brute, with a hand as firm as fate, and watched the torch-bearers go over. Before he realised it fully, the bier was also passing across. Those who had reached the other side were grouped there, holding their torches ; sure-footed peasants, like the bearers of the bier, and wearing like them the national peasant-dress. Against profound arborial



gloom he saw her figure suspended ; above, a leaf-gap showed the distant stars ; below, the waters of a subterranean stream flowed coldly at depths unfathomed.

. . . Waldemar started as if from sleep. The cortège had crossed in safety and passed upwards. The light of its last torches showed him the opposite verge of the gap of blackness at his feet. . . . He backed the horse and put him at it. The animal galloped full onward and swerved at the brink. He backed him again and spurred him : trembling and sweating, the horse would not stir. Waldemar smiled, a smile as fixed and ghastly as a rictus. He divined the brute's terror, for the chasm was wide, and from its mouth a damp exhaled, betraying the buried flood. He, also, had measured it from lip to lip, and thought of the secrets of its gorge. But what the animal feared, the man desired ; he would have heard hoofs grate against the edge they could not hold, have felt the dizzy swing of the first turn in mid-air, have known that the secret waters were to give him grave-room till the world's end, gladly. He spurred the horse at the gap again. . . . The beast sought to throw him, halting anew at the brink of the abyss. A duel began between them, fiercer because of this attempt. The King, matching strength to strength, and feint to feint, muttered menacing words as if to one who understood them. The horse was that which Fredegonde had ridden to her death.

The moon was rising behind the mountain, and though the torches had flickered out of sight, they had not left the place to darkness. A sombre twilight showed horse and rider, like the spectre of a centaur, reel and bound ; the gulf gaped black and silent, like a monstrous mouth awaiting its prey. . . . The horse reared, plunged, made short passades, kicked, snorted, foamed, careered. He felt with fury

the checks of an alert and ineludible control. He tried by a hundred stratagems to rid himself of his rider, and after each struggle found the grip of knees grown stronger on his sides. His hoofs struck sparks as he trampled ; his foam flew off in flakes ; he knew his master bestrode him, and resisted because he knew. There was something weird in this combat : on the brute's part instinctively afraid, and nerved by dread ; on the man's, watchful, merciless, resolved.

Abruptly, as if hopeless, the horse stopped struggling, and stood still. Waldemar backed him, let him breathe, and rode him at the gap. . . . He galloped over the level, and cleared the leap with a desperate spring. The King's blood rioted to meet the risk, and then flowed leaden, life secure.

"You devil!" he said slowly, riding upward, "you would have spared yourself as much as me."

The horse strained his sinews to ascend, as if all cause of dread now lay behind him. . . . Far ahead, pale and elusive as marsh-lights, glimmered the torches mounting the height. Waldemar fell into a sort of aching stupor, as a wounded man sleeps, suffering still. He rather lagged than hastened: he was reaching the end of the chapter of his youth. Romance, hope, passion, one by one, dropped ember-like into the ashes. . . . The horse, unguided, found his way through rustling trodden leaves and crackling branches. Suddenly they came upon the torch-men standing together on a bleak and treeless space. The horse stopped. Waldemar found himself upon the plateau of the summit.

The peasants knelt, holding their torches high above the heads they bowed to him. The King saw her shining bier set down before them, and behind them the outline of a funeral pile.

. . . This was the end: no hope, no respite now ; not even the hope of death met on the way, not even

the respite of the height to be ascended. He fronted the inevitable. . . . For a breathing-time the kneeling men, the corpse, the rider, and the horse were equally stirless. . . . A sense of the bitter uselessness of waiting came upon Waldemar: he spoke.

"Go on."

The men rose and approached the bier: the bearers lifted it. Waldemar saw her pale impassive face, on which was neither sorrow nor adieu. They receded, leaving him paralysed, tormented, his passion's impulse to renew the last farewell straining at the shackles of despair. . . . He watched them mount the pyre and lay her down, and leave her and descend. He watched them touch torches to its corners, and fire breed fire there.

. . . The peasants scattered before the King's oncoming horse, and then stood smitten with a terror which out-did all personal fear. Waldemar had climbed the lighted funeral pile, and disappeared.

Minutes passed. The snapping of twigs alight was followed by continuous crackling: the fumes of burning aromatic woods, of nard and myrrh, smoked upward. The men stared awestruck, daring neither take to flight nor warn their King; gazing at the tinted flames with stupid, anxious eyes, like savages at some feared idol. None divined the impulse which had launched him on the danger, nor the triumph-agony of that farewell.

. . . He was at the great pyre's edge, and coming down. They saw him, and a shout escaped them as if in sudden freeing of imprisoned breaths of dread. He leaped to the ground through the girdle of fire, and mounted his horse.

"Return!" he commanded. They passed back into the forest.

Waldemar watched the ascent of the flame, encroaching stealthily, then boldly. As it made head-

way it grew eager, like a monster which indulges its caprices, and from eager became fierce. Its muttering greatened to a roar: its volumes leaped together above the summit of the pyre. . . . Waldemar reeled in his saddle, and fled as if hell had gaped behind him.

CHAPTER IV

"TO THE KING!"

"Lui seul, battu des flots qui toujours se reforment,
Il s'en va dans l'abîme et s'en va dans la nuit."

VICTOR HUGO.

IT was midnight at Königslust, and the King had not returned. The vivacity of excitement had left those gathered in the castle; they became gradually silent, though none of them retired, or conversed in low-voiced groups. No one ventured to the card-tables, for while many would have welcomed the diversion, the noble jester's exile was too fresh in all their minds. The general lassitude expressed itself at last in a dead pause. This was broken by a woman's laugh, nervous, triumphant, bitter.

"There is going to be a storm," said Ilona. "I hope His Majesty will not regret delaying."

Gadatz, whom she had not addressed, uneasily stirred in his arm-chair. Conversation recommenced with feverish abruptness. The clocks of Königslust told twelve.

A minute later a gust of wind shook the château and moaned past.

"Hark!" cried Ilona. "There is the first of it. The King is a brave man!"

"And a faithful lover, Countess," muttered the jealous wretch beside her.

"Faithful till death," she retorted. "Had you been"—smiling, she glanced at her rival and back—"you would know neither regrets nor fears."

Gadatz, while her sweet and cynical laughter mixed with the rumour of a distant thunder-peal, left the room in haste and silence. . . . Another blast struck full on the façade, herald and challenger. These repeated signals of the storm, like the first blows of the battering-ram on mediæval fortress-gates, made all uneasy and attentive. Gadatz returned: he had sent two men to the summit with cordials and provisions for the King's protection in descending. He appeared less harassed, feeling that whatever might occur, he had done his duty. . . . The wind began a fitful but persistent monologue, melancholy as a dirge. With this mixed a sound, deep, indistinct, and growing, the answer of the lake's stirred waters. The perturbation of the night reacted on the watchers: some of them arose and moved about; one drew aside a curtain. At the instant a lightning-flash half blinded him, and threw into the room its dazzling glare.

"Ah!" cried Ilona, "superb!"—but her words and another woman's cry were lost in the mighty crack of thunder.

Everyone rose.

"That was overhead!"

"The King!"

"I thought the storm was distant!"

"So, it is," rejoined Ilona. "But two storms have rushed to meet in battle on these hills!" There was something wild in her face as she watched the alarm in the doctor's: she spoke to him with ironical appeal. "What ought we to do, my dear Gadatz?"

"Wait," he answered firmly, "till the men whom I have sent to help His Majesty return with him."

The Countess met Gadatz's stern look with an answering glance of satire.

"No doubt your men are lightning-proof, since you mean them to pass up through the forest? Or

perhaps a sacrifice to the manes of Fredegonde might soothe the King . . ."

The physician turned away. One o'clock struck. The distant storm, approaching, replied with muffled drums to the challenge of the near one's cannon. A factitious vivacity succeeded the courtiers' surprise and weariness: the men grew witty; the women laughed, making those vapid little sallies which a pretty mouth induces one to think amusing; argument and repartee began, and everyone talked as if he thought the whole responsibility of entertainment his. All this resulted from the watchers' wish to escape nature's overawing influence: the storm-ploughed water and wilder wind, the lonely and sounding pines, the cloud-sheathed lightning, the desolate night, perturbed without elevating them. Gadatz alone sat counting the minutes till the foresters' return, sure that they would find Waldemar keeping an awful vigil by the pyre.

An hour passed. No rain had fallen, but sheets of lightning simulated it. The lake raged at the bases of the hills, which plunged their straight walls down a hundred fathoms. Thunder resounded in appalling peals as the storms rushed into collision, and echoes, bounding from mountain to mountain, rumoured louder the battle of the clouds.

It was half-past one, but no one had retired. Cowed by the fury of the night, they dared not act except in concert, feeling, amidst these blind and awful forces, the human need of human countenance. There was no longer any effort to converse: they waited.

The wind had set, and rushed with a dull and ceaseless roar past the castle, battering it in an onslaught under which the walls vibrated. The women expressed absurd fears in their almost intolerable state of nervous tension.

"Are we safe?"

"But it feels as if this hurricane would blow the castle down!"

"Remember, ladies," smiled Arseni, "that before the late King restored and renamed it, Königslust was Lasnitza of the Lake, a fortress of Alberia's ancient Czars. It has stood for five centuries in spite of wind and weather and the devastating Turk, so a storm is not likely to blow down walls which time and war have left unshaken."

Ilona, only, showed daredevil courage, her flashing eyes upon Gadatz. Between these two there was antagonism, which on the death of Fredegonde became a struggle. Devoted to him, he suspected her wish to gain an influence upon the King: she, divining that he did so, answered his resistance with defiance.

A door opened. Everyone, startled, turned. Instead of Waldemar, they saw a chamberlain, who came towards Gadatz. He announced to him that the foresters sent to the summit had returned. . . . The doctor, half-risen from his chair with eagerness, dropped back as if struck a sudden blow. The rest grew pale, and left their seats: Ilona herself made a steadying step behind her to avoid falling. At the instant, Karaman, the King's great boarhound, mixed his howling with the wind's. Then Gadatz resolutely rose and entered the anteroom, where the men were in attendance.

"Where is His Majesty?"

They bowed profoundly.

"Gospodar, we do not know."

"What have you done?"

"We climbed to the mountain-top, and found the fire burning down, but there was no one near it. We shouted, but the wind snatched our voices from our lips: we searched, but the lightnings trod in our

footsteps. Szargol is there: we came back. One could not live an hour on the mountain-top to-night."

Gadatz turned to the chamberlain.

"Let twenty men make ready to go up with me. The King's life is in danger."

The sally of the searching party was watched from the hall as Waldemar's going had been, but the faces at the windows were paler, drawn with nervous tension and fatigue. The men outside faced the wind as they would have faced the front of a hostile host, and two of their torches were blown out. Gadatz, at their head, white-bearded, resolute, met the challenge of the lightning with undaunted eyes, and gave the signal for advance. They disappeared in the black vast of night, now clamorous with answering thunder.

The old physician's action, devoted, prompt, and bold, showed elements of heroism. He risked his own life for his master's, in the fulness of a pity no less noble than the deep love it was born of, sure that, unless he led the band himself, the search would not be prosecuted. He was now certain that the King had succumbed to a paroxysm of madness, one of those encroachments of his inherited malady which overtook him with the spring of a wild beast. To what might it impel him? . . . Gadatz was aware of conjecture's futility here: the physician recognised the disease's faculty of prolific and undividable caprice. Again, to what might it not impel him? . . .

They were working upwards through the forest belt. The wood's vast silence had become a vaster uproar, like the clamour of a multitude in dread. The pale glare of lightning showed the swaying trees, bough grinding bough, a myriad leaves torn off and falling. Pines leaned together, blown like grass, some snapped at the root, and borne up by their fellows. The living creatures of the woods

had vanished, safe in lair and nest and cell: only the band of men, wind-beaten, lightning-dazzled, thunder-deafened, dared the storm.

Far above, a tree was struck. A mighty boulder, unstirred through the winters of an age, rolled from its shattered base, to which, after a century's embrace, still clung the roots which had betrayed it to the lightning. The mass began with majesty its downward course, deliberate, unseen, unheard. It ploughed deep the forest's floor of earth, ground fine its stones, and overbore its trees. It gathered impetus, as if divining, far below, the welcome of the waters. . . . The joy of freedom seemed to seize it: from rolling, it began to bound. Above the roar of the wind, when the thunder ceased for a second, could be heard dull shocks of sound; the sound of the enormous weight descending upon earth which trembled under it. The monster hurled itself through the blind night: its power was proved; it could destroy. It met with the might of its myriad years the century-old trees; it leaped towards the men below, ephemæræ, with strength, let loose at last, sucked from the breasts of chaos.

Gadatz and his band were ascending. Three more torches had expired. A man turned back, though his comrades called him coward, and his conscience, traitor. Others would have followed him had shame not spurred them on, and these, though outwardly obedient, were inwardly rebellious. Foremost of all, fronting first the dangers and the terrors of the way, the brave old man pressed to the succour of his master.

They reached the chasm beside which Waldemar had struggled with the horse. Here, as if trapped in the mysterious depths of riven stone, the wind raged with unearthly howlings. Across this haunted and unplumbed abyss, there was no bridge but the dead

tree. The men stopped. Some turned sullen eyes upon Gadatz; some murmured openly. The superstitious dread of these strong sons of a wild race, till now suppressed, approached an outbreak. . . . Their leader turned, suddenly aware that only five or six of them were following him. The aspect of the rest, cowed by a brutal dread of the unknown, roused by the ferocious instinct of self-preservation, wild with physical fear of the warring elemental forces, haggard, defiant, dogged, stupefied, announced to him the birth of a new danger. They were becoming uncontrollable, and their mutiny might cost the King his life. . . . Gadatz seized intrepidly the instant before action could succeed this ominous inertia. They saw him mount with daring strides the fallen trunk which bridged the chasm, and stand, staff planted there and torch high held, stern and strong above the raging gap.

"Onward!" he thundered. "Will you be the first Alberians our country ever branded cowards? Onward! To the King!"

Patriotism, loyalty, and pride, the strongest national attributes, responded. The men remembered their birthright of courage: they charged the ascent as they would have charged in battle.

The stone was on its way.

Gadatz and his band had reached an open slope, above which the rock rose, sheer and unscaleable, forming the face of a low cliff. Again, above this, other slopes ascended, lost in the belt of woods about the summit. The men paused to catch their breath, still looking upwards. As they did so, a new sound was heard. . . . The sound was dull and sullen, like a minute-gun's at sea. It had not repeated itself thrice, before a mighty thunder-volley drowned it. Gadatz, as this ceased, was about to advance, when he heard the sound again, and louder. Instinctively

he scanned the faces of the men. He saw that they had heard it too. . . . Distinct above the riot of the wind, the sound, at each repetition, seemed nearer. But, though nearer, they could not tell from what direction it approached. They tossed wild torches in the wilder face of night, listened and looked, awe-stricken. They drew together: some muttered charms, some fingered curious relics hung about their necks. Though no monstrous shape had yet appalled them, they felt a menace in this sound: they heard it coming, the Unknown, with footsteps like the tramp of destiny. . . . Gadatz looked about him, above, below, but darkness baffled him. He also felt a fast-approaching peril, but feared only the cowardice of others. He looked on danger merely as a hindrance. His whole thought was for Waldemar.

Suddenly a shout of mortal dread went up. The men had felt the ground shake under them. They dared not fly—destruction might meet them if they fled, nor stay, lest it should seek them where they stood. They could not save themselves, because they could not see. They lifted their faces in a last appeal to the sky, which seemed to hide their God. . . . For answer, lightning flashed from pole to pole. They saw at last. Rebounding in its huge entirety, though each shock seemed as if it must have shattered it, the boulder, like the mad and monstrous demon of the mad and monstrous night, was rushing down. . . . It leapt again and whirled in mid-air: it would clear the cliff and crush them where they stood. . . . They fell; they flung themselves upon their faces; they staggered a few steps aside. Gadatz alone, with solemn eyes, watched the stone describe its mighty arc. The angry air shrieked as it clove it; this giant rock, which had been its sport, and that of snow and rain and storm since the beginning, was leaping down to plunge into the lake's profound, whose calm it had



coveted for ages. . . . It buffeted the quaking earth, and, with a fresh stupendous bound, descended. It had lighted on the cliff-head, soared above the prostrate men, and vanished in the gulf of night.

Gadatz felt a large and strange emotion, a sublime expansion of the soul. It was less a sensation of relief, than a response to nature's august and awful challenge. He stood where the event had left him, his torch lifted, looking upwards. Suddenly one of his men dashed past him with the aspect of a maniac pursued.

"Halt!"

The tempest swallowed Gadatz's shout and the fugitive figure. The old man saw, with wrath and scorn, that his band, panic-stricken, was dispersing: men brave in battle, they scattered like sheep before what they believed to be the supernatural. He watched them. No word nor act of his could hold them now, flying, deaf, blind, and frantic. The last torch, the last human being, disappeared. He was alone upon the mountain.

Gadatz looked towards the summit, above which lightnings revealed the vast abysses of the storm-clouds. He knew that he might never reach it living, but, if he did, that he might find the King. The King!—that sovereignty from which all things escaped; that head whose heavy crown still left it undefended; that monarch, among the millions of whose subjects one alone cared or dared to succour him to-night! . . . Gadatz, with the vision, calm and clear, of age to which life and suffering have taught their lesson, saw in this figure those of the lover, the mourner, and perhaps the madman. . . . His steadfast eyes still looked towards the summit. The old man began to ascend.

No rain had fallen yet, and the devil of the lightning revelled naked in infernal splendour. There was a taint of sulphur in the air. Thunder sported with the

echoes, till the hills seemed shouting each to each like angry Titans. Gadatz leant heavy on his staff. . . . The inanimate seemed to be vivified with a monstrous vitality, which blasted all the usual forms of life. The old man battled for each step he took : stumbling in the night of sudden darkness ; dazzled by the blaze of sudden light ; wrestling with the viewless giant of the wind. The furious forces dominant assailed him, their only living challenger. . . . The riot of the tempest did not daunt him, nor the sense of solitude ; but when he looked upward, weighted with fatigue and age, and thought of Waldemar, he neared despair.

Suddenly he came upon the bodies of four men, their faces to the ground : they lay as if struck dead. Gadatz, newly vigorous, his torch aloft, leaned over them and stirred them with his staff.

“If any of you live,” he shouted, “up!”

Two of them grovelled closer to the ground ; a third staggered erect, to fall again ; the fourth leapt to his feet, staring about with horror-blinded eyes. The torch’s flame streamed back before the wind : the rent skies shut, and there was darkness.

“Up!” Like the tocsin’s summons sounded the inexorable voice. “Up, and follow me ! Up, and to your duty ! Up, ye coney-hearted cowards !”

In answer he heard a shout, hoarse with despair, dread, supplication :

“Szargol !”

Gadatz stood half hopeless before this spectacle of men who could cower at the feet of a chimera. He began again, with sudden force and fire, enraged at their imbruted stupor.

“Are you dogs, crouching there ? Up, every son of you ! I am here to lead, and, if the way is walled with devils, you shall follow !”

They looked up as the lightning, redly flashing, lit

his face. He pointed to the summit with the gesture of a warrior-prophet, his white head uncovered to the storm. They staggered up, and then fell on their knees about him, kissing his garments and his hands.

"He is more than human!" they muttered. "He is more than mortal! Let us follow!"

Five men laboured up the mountain-side instead of one; three torch-flames leapt and wavered. Two of the four who had fled, rushing up because they knew the stone went down, had held high by instinct their forgotten brands till they fell where Gadatz had found them. Now, with enthusiasm savage as their fear, they pressed on to please their master: they felt as if, protected by a Power of Good, they dared defy the Demon. . . . Gadatz's face, with its stamp of old endurance and resolve, showed a sort of troubled peace. He thought, "If I cannot hold out long enough, these four are left to help him. If I cannot go farther than the summit, these will search, and bring him back." Behind this was the grim dread of another foe, a cloaked, masked, ambushed foe. He might have to fight with madness a battle more awful than his battle with the storm. . . . They entered the belt of woods which ringed the wide waste of the summit; here at intervals they met the mighty footprints of the stone. Gadatz was haunted with a second fear, excited afresh by these, that when they found the King, after this lethal night, he would be dead.

"Even if he has spared himself," thought Gadatz, "will the storm have spared him?" And pondering, so that he forgot the rugged way he went, and the tumultuous world about him, he recalled the curses of madness and mourning lying heavy on Waldemar. The old man bowed his dauntless head, as if it felt the weight of them, thinking, "If he has died to-night, death has been merciful for once." But his experience of many lives, not least his own, and many

deaths, reminded him that Death is no piteous gaoler, to open when weary hands beat desperate on the door. "No," he thought, "no, no, no; not yet. I shall find him wandering back towards the burnt-out pyre. . . ."

They reached the summit. Gadatz gave a great sigh, and, grasping his staff with both hands, rested on it. Winds whirled across the open with the riot of infernal legions freed; lightnings seemed to throw apart the very portals of the sky. The pyre's wreck showed a glow of dim and changing red. Suddenly a band of horsemen passed Gadatz like a troop of phantoms. . . . The old man reeled a little and turned to the rest; he doubted his eyes. But the four were staring speechless towards where the band had been when darkness reingulfed them.

"What men besides ourselves would venture here to-night?" began Gadatz, much shaken.

"Haiduks! The Haiduks! Stroimir led them—Stroimir the Devil, on his black horse!"

"Stroimir?" muttered Gadatz. "Stroimir? The King is dead if they cross him!"

As he spoke, from the cloud in labour the lightning descended, intolerably bright. Gadatz fell, stricken and blind. The tardy rain rushed down in torrents. He fell, but his search was over, his task was done. He had found his master.

Waldemar rode towards them on his sweating and labouring horse: his face was pale, and his eyes on fire with the hideous energy of madness. The brute beneath him was dying, and no longer heeded the spur; from its gashed sides blood dripped slowly, channelling a mask of mire and foam. They saw it rear—roll over, and they saw the King leap clear: instead of coming to Gadatz's side, he stood above the horse. Into his face was translated the spirit of the turbulent and cruel night. He exulted; he had ridden to death the horse of Fredegonde.

CHAPTER V

STROIMIR

"Whose is that sword—that voice and eye of flame,
That heart of inextinguishable ire?
Death in his looks and terror in his name."

THOMAS ROSCOE.

THE moon had risen and was shining on an amphitheatre of hills beyond the storm. In the plain which these solemn sentinels kept guard on and surrounded, men were assembled. The naked sides of the treeless hills showed every boulder and fissure: no spy or armed force could shelter there unseen by those below. Though on the hill-sides, wild and bare, no figure of man or horse appeared, bands of men issued from between the feet of the hills, and joined those on the plain. These were wild figures, lithe and tall, strange-garmented and stranger-weaponed; they were all alert and hushed, with listening looks, and often hands which fretted at the arms thrust in their sashes. Some common expectation turned their eyes towards the lowest hill of those which sat encamped there. The moon hung above it like a presage or a promise, and its outline towered black, abrupt, and bold. Legend and tradition made the hill a haunted spot: on its summit lay the Stone of Marko. Here the nation's hero, five centuries before, had ridden on his giant charger, Sharaz, clothed in the skin of a bear, its head his helm, while beside him, naked, swung the

mighty sword with which he could cleave in twain an anvil. Marko is a supernatural being, who lives for a hundred and sixty years, riding always the same horse, which drinks from his wine-bowl, and whose head he strikes off at a blow when he feels at last the hand of God, "the ancient slayer," upon him. Mounted thus, "a dragon seated upon a dragon," he pursued into the air to the height of many lances the Vila, beautiful genius of the hills and forests, who had mortally wounded his companion, and forced her, captured by her floating golden hair, to pledge him aid as bond-brother, and cure his wounded friend, before he would release her. From the Stone of Marko Sharaz sprang upwards, pursuing the Vila, and left his hoof-prints there: deep in the rock as the legend was deep in the heart of Alberian story. . . . The men who stood watching the haunted hill conjured out of the shadow the blackness of Sharaz, and out of the moonbeams the Vila's hair, but out of their secret souls the hope of Marko returned, the Liberator.

A thrilling voice rose from the midst of the multitude, chanting the song of the hero's sleep: it was Guamar, the bold Haiduk Veliko's son, an untaught bard of the mountains. Down from the days of the nation's fall came the songs of its olden glory: its kings, its heroes, its battles, its mighty death-struggle with Sultan Murad. As generations and years succeeded each other, the old men past work would recite the piesmas to the women gathered at their spinning and the husbandmen resting by the winter hearth. The one-stringed gusle's monotonous sound at each verse's end seemed their slavery's sigh for the murdered grandeur of empire and valour, the freedom of long ago. The wondering children, listening, dreamed of great swords, strong chargers, and men like gods; as generations and years again succeeded each other, they, grown old, sang to their grandsons.

Thus, through five centuries of Turkish tyranny, the nation's heart still beat ; yet now, though the Turk was vanquished, the country's King was of alien race. . . . The voice of the poet-singer rose through the listening space of the moonlit night, relating the deeds of Marko on Kossovo's fatal field. Lazar, Alberia's last Czar, was dead of his sixty wounds ; the Sultan Murad dying ; Militza the Queen's nine brothers fell side by side because brother would not leave brother ; the royal standard's gold-crowned lion was low in the blood of the royal host ; men died only from the mighty boom of drums and blare of trumpets ; the wind could not blow for the forests of lances, says Neshri, the Turkish chronicler, nor the water flow when the horsemen crowded across the streams of the plain ; and though each Alberian held it a crime to die without taking an enemy with him, the green-garbed infidels swarmed, and the true God frowned on the Christian army. Marko had fought like a dragon ; to touch him shivered sword and shattered mace : above him the Vila, invisible, shielded him, spreading her golden hair. The hoofs of Sharaz were thunder-bolts, lightnings his eyes, his breathing flame, but the True God turned from the hero, turned from the nation, decreed defeat. Marko, dyed to the brows in blood, slew seven thousand Turks, but seventy-seven thousand Slavs lay dead by the fallen standard. Night fell, like the heavy frown of the True God : the moon rose, the Crescent of the Turk. When Marko saw that darkness and that symbol, he left the battlefield : the Vila led him to a cavern in the mountains, and lulled him to sleep with the storm-wind in the pines. The hero sleeps, and the Vila watches ; his sword hangs beside him, his horse crops the moss ; but when the sword falls and the moss is consumed, Marko will awake and rise again to save his country.

The sonorous recitative ended: silence for a second cloaked the hills. Then "He will awake and rise again!" A thousand voices thundered to the echoes. "Stroimir!"

A giant horseman, black against the waning moon, stood still upon the summit. Silent, he loomed before the men below, like a phantom risen at their invocation.

"Stroimir! Stroimir!" shouted the Haiduks, with clashing arms' barbaric salutation. "Stroimir!" the mountains echoed, till the vault of night rang back his name. The moon shone full on uplifted faces. Another horseman joined the first. Guamar's eyes, on fire with the ardour of the song and of the greeting, grew sombre as the night.

"Miloutim . . ." he muttered to his bond-brother Maxim, who had thrown a strong arm about his shoulders as he ceased to chant.

"It is thou whom she loves," answered Maxim. "It is thou alone whom she loves."

Guamar smiled, a touching smile of gratitude and doubt. He was watching the second horseman, a figure slighter and less royally erect than Stroimir's, and saw, as if the noonday sun revealed it, the heavy face and brutal eyes of Stroimir's son, his rival. If the Haiduks placed the father on the throne, as their delegates were met to-night to swear they would conspire to, the son would reward old Lazar by wedding his grand-daughter Bosilika. . . . Two more horsemen gained the summit: Guamar knew that these were Lazar himself, the wise Ulysses of the Haiduks, and Jovan, the warrior-priest, often comrade of rash Veliko in former battles with the Turk. The singer watched them wistfully; his father's brother-in-arms, the dauntless Archimandrite, and the old man whose grand-children Maxim and Bosilika were brother and beloved to him. The spring brought flowers to the year; the summer, fruit; and should not love bring

her to him? Such a love as his, the ardent summer of the soul, seemed fated, like the year, to rich fruition.

"Listen to Jovan," said Maxim, seeing Guamar's head sunk on his breast, his eyes cast down. "Let love be until we meet at the Kralize, and you shall see Bosa as Queen in the procession. Listen to Jovan, and remember, brother, that a Haiduk thinks of vengeance before all!"

Guamar tossed back his head, and the moon's pale glitter met a wilder fire in his eyes. The horsemen, black against the moon, crowned the haunted hill like a troop of phantoms. The voice of Jovan pealed its thunder through the night.

"Sons, you are met here in a brotherhood of hate, with one memory and one purpose. To-day the son of Stroimir attains to man's estate, and the son of the royal murderer of Vlastimir has sat a year upon the throne."

There was a murmur from the plain, the mutter of a smouldering volcano, long believed extinct, which prepares to pour its lava from fresh craters.

"What have we prayed for?—Freedom! What have we fought for?—Freedom! What have we toiled, bled, laid down our lives for?—Freedom!"

"Freedom! Freedom!"

His voice was drowned in the clamour of the echo it had summoned from a thousand hearts.

"Sons, since Kossovo our nation has lain like a lightning-blasted tree. Since Marko left Kossovo's cursed field, we have been Rayahs to the Turk. Five hundred years have lagged away since then, black ages full of outrage, despotism, and rebellion: when our women were dishonoured, our men impaled and strangled, our priests killed at the altar, and our young men sold as slaves. The sons of Lazar's heroes were forbidden to bear arms: a rustic's staff replaced their fathers' swords. We might ride neither horse nor

dromedary ; if we met a Turk on the high road, our duty was to halt and give him place ; we owed our personal service to any Moslem who demanded it. If fifty of our brothers, armed, were escorting a bride to the wedding, they must dismount and hide their pistols in their garments, should they see a single Turk ! How often have the Subasches stripped the peasant of his feast-dress, and used it as a cover for a horse ! How often they have broken in upon the mass with ribald rage ; or, after forcing our terrified women to dance the Kolo before their houses, carried off the fairest ! The Moslems obeyed their Koran where it says, ' Oppress the infidels until they pay the poll-tax and are humbled.' They grasped a tithe from each vineyard and bee-hive, a tax on every head of cattle ; the Dimnitsa was wrenched from every married pair, the Glavnatza from every household. Our villages were forced to pay the price of blood, the Krwnina, a thousand piastres, for the Turks looked on murder as a loss more than a crime, on us as beasts whose labour had its value. Once, on the collectors of the tithe of maize declaring that the bushel measures were too small, our brothers broke them on the Moslems' heads, saying, *thus* they would pay in future ! We became a byword, for our nation paid a haratch only meant to provide slippers for the Sultan. The land was taxed with the Poresa, fixed forever a century ago, so that those whose land had decreased in value had to pay more than each year's entire yield. Our very hearths were taxed with the Gasdalik ; and we were forced to give roof and food to all who travelled with a firman or upon the Sultan's service. At hay-harvest the peasants about Zarilov, summoned to Constantinople from their waiting fields, were driven in a herd to render feudal service in mowing the meadows of the Sultan. During a hundred days in each year, the peasants in every Alberian village were forced to yield

bond-service to their Pacha. Every five years the tribute of youths was exacted ; the hope of the nation carried to bear arms amongst the accursed infidels against their country. Even their Bishop taxed the papas he ordained, and spurned his Christian flock : no Slav, but Greek, riding by in sumptuous habit, superb with his Sultan-given insignia of power, the sword and busdowan. . . . But while the wolves were ranging the valleys, the eagle watched in the mountains : the Haiduks, swooping down, plundered the plunderers passing burdened with booty. Sons, it was our bands which formed the nation's only bulwark : the Haiduks, the robbers, whom the Turk, when one fell into his hands alive, stoned, flogged with iron chains, flayed, strangled, or impaled with their feet left dangling on the ground for the dogs to devour. We it was, the brigands, whom our people turned to for protection from those grinders of the poor, those ravishers : to us, in the mountain forests and caverns, the weak and oppressed fled, certain of shelter ; amongst us young women of our nation have found refuge as inviolable as the sanctuary's. And we," the voice of the warrior-priest grew menacing, exultant, "we were the brand whose quenchless fire showed our land the way to Freedom !"

"And we will show it Freedom's self!" a young voice shouted as he paused : the singer Guamar's.

"There came a time when life was worse than death ; when our wives were not safe by our hearths, nor our daughters in the fields or at the well ; our mountain cloisters burned like bale-fires ; the sacred fountain of Svornik was choked with the corpses of its monks ; whole districts were ravaged ; the gates of Zarilov were grisly with men's heads set up on pikes ; even our children, in mockery of baptism, were flung in boiling water. Spurred, lashed, goaded, mad with wrong and loss, the country rose at last. Rebellion

burst like a volcano under the feet of the oppressor. . . . Now arms secreted in hollow trees and rock-clefts were drawn forth; every defile swarmed with Haiduks—robbers!—patriots aflame to free their country. The axes and scythes of the peasants were joined by pistols, carbines, and knives; at last a cannon, even, was obtained by the Rayahs' leader, Vlastimir."

There was a pause after the potent name of Stroimir's father was pronounced. A murmur passed across the assembly on the plain, as a wind shakes the trees of the forest.

"It was he, as a youth, whom a Turk told to stand aside or he would blow his brains out, and who shot the Turk. The first shot he ever fired hit the target, a feat for which the Turks conceived a hate so jealous of him that they planned his death, on which he joined the Haiduks. His mother was carried into slavery, but he led ten thousand men to rescue her, and brought her home in triumph. He was the brain, and his bond-brother, Veliko, the heart of the rebellion. Did he not kill with his own hand the Deli who rode through the streets of Zarilov calling his dogs by the names of Alberian heroes? Did he not exchange his Turkish prisoners for pigs? Did he not swear to send the Mussulmans no tribute but the fire in our fusils? Was he not feared by the Turks as one in whose footsteps trod victory? When the Pacha of Zarilov called for the haratch, commanding besides this twelve beautiful girls, it was Vlastimir who sent him twelve pigs' tails to garnish his turban, and word that if he needed further answer, he would write one with his dagger! . . . And now, when revolution stalked the land, the Haiduks turned to Vlastimir, the people to the Haiduks. Like rivers of fire they rushed down the mountains from their secret places to the plains, and drove the astounded Turks into the fortresses and towns, where they besieged them. It is true that the

majority were miserably armed ; but on the one hand was despair so grim that some proposed killing their women and children, and flying to the mountains, where they could war with the Turk for the rest of their days ; while on the other hand stood Vlastimir, who said that those who would might return home, but that those who stayed, whether leaders or soldiers, must expect death at his hand if they deserted. He decreed that whosoever should desert the post entrusted to his valour, should be stripped of his arms, arrayed as a girl, and given to the women, who should lead him through the country to be scoffed at, with a spindle and distaff for his weapons. Such a captain and such fierce days made heroes out of ploughmen : each house in hours of danger sent forth all who could bear arms, and each Alberian was a warrior. In cases less extreme, one man of two, or two of three, went out to battle : thus the farming could still be carried on, and if there were only one man in a house, he took turn with his neighbour weekly. Our brothers were above receiving pay for the services they did their country. They wore their best attire, and each bore his own weapons : the women sent provisions after them on sumpter-horses conducted by those who in the village were exempt from outdoor labour. Many brought axes and iron-bound staves instead of sabres and fusils ; they even made field-pieces out of hard cherry-wood, and charged at times sheltered by swine-cars on whose axle-trees a wooden screen set up shielded the driver. Once they placed horses round the trenches, with cloaks on poles beside them to replace the missing forces ; again, rash Veliko routed the Turks by dashing on horseback through their camp at night with his men, shouting, 'The Turks are flying !' There were times when the exhausted enemy even sent our brothers his peace-symbol, or fled before them in the darkness to avoid a fight at dawn. Beside

prodigious victories were hideous defeats : at Kasnitza the Moslems made a ghastly pyramid of heads—a thousand of the heads of our brave brothers ! . . . But behind defeat and victory alike, were iron bodies, souls of fire. Even the monks in their mountain cloisters lay armed in wait for the Turk, and so fiercely attacked that pursued and pursuer found death in the boiling torrents. Every man seen with the Pacha's burunty or pardon was slaughtered without mercy. While the Turkish garrison of Shabaz, on being cannonaded, begged to be allowed to fly in safety, which was granted on condition of their giving up their finest Arab horses, whose trappings were enriched with silver, Knes Stepan Singelitch, elsewhere, in need of reinforcements, was no longer able to hold his ground, and the Moslems, crossing the trenches filled with their slain comrades' bodies, having scaled the walls, he blew up the fort he was defending rather than surrender to the enemy alive. In the same way the Haiduk Milore, covering his friends' retreat after a desperate fight, was cannonaded in a koula which, unfortified, the Turks yet dared not storm ; and here, a mass of wounds, and hopeless of escape, he blew his brains out to save his few staunch comrades the danger of remaining to defend him. Such were the deeds of our brothers under the ancient standard of our kings, the gold-crowned lion ; such were the feats of Vlastimir, the Dragon of Alberia, whom the Vili have crowned with wreaths of laurel, the reward bought by heroic deeds, not gold ! ”

“ Hail to the shade of Vlastimir ! Hail, Stroimir ! ” the Haiduks shouted, with a clash of arms.

“ Hail,” thundered Jovan, in a voice of wrath and sorrow, “ to Vlastimir, his country's martyr ! ”

A cloud rushed dark across the moon, like a woman's wind-tossed tresses swept across her weeping face. There was a pause of dark and silence.

"Sons, nine years of battle drove the Turks beyond our frontier, and left Vlastimir Alberia's master. Meanwhile he was thinking for his country, beginning to found schools, build barracks and bridges, make roads, and frame the Ristav, Constitution. It was he who raised churches of our forefathers' religion near the infidels' polluted mosques. He summoned the Skouptchina, established the Soviet, our senate, and appointed judges. At the same time, the undaunted Haiduk, winner of an hundred battles and the hero of his time, was learning to read and write! . . . For first comes the faith," said the priest, holding high the great gold cross on his breast, "and next the sword of our fathers," he drew a flashing blade from its scabbard, "and after these the worldly lore which without them is dust and ashes."

He paused, his head bowed, with its flowing hair and beard, and tall black priestly kalpak. Suddenly he burst out—

"Sons, too well you know the rest!—the end of him who saved our country! In the midst of peace we are yet in war; in the midst of life we are in death. While Alberia was seeking for peace after long battle, and hope after long despair, our brothers of Bulgaria were assembling to strike a mighty blow for freedom. Soon the smoke and the rumour of battle reached us, the tales of outrage and strife, and across our frontiers the Rayahs poured in starving thousands for refuge. The Moslems pretended the right to follow, and slay, burn, ravish, as they did with us of old, casting our dishonoured women back into the flames of their blazing houses. And because Vlastimir, convoking the Skouptchina, agreed to help the fugitives, and fight for them at need, the Turk's allies, England and Austria, palliating all the barbarian's brutalities, decided that 'in order to secure the peace of Europe' a German prince must mount the throne. Sons, alas!

too well you know the rest! How Vlastimir untimely vanished, and they rumoured far and wide that he had fled; the country fell into disorder; a stern-faced Teuton governed in his stead amid a nation lost without its leader; and then how one black night our hero crossed the Danube, and was shot as he regained his native soil, shot down as a rebel and a Haiduk!"

A low deep murmur swelled and sank across the plain like the mutter of a coming earthquake.

"Twelve years passed, and the dead usurper's son proclaimed an amnesty upon his coronation. Stroimir returned to the mountains of his home, whose far-off summits he had ever kept in sight whilst a herdsman on the Montenegrin hillsides."

The Haiduks burst into a roar of rage and gladness.

"Hail, Stroimir! Welcome and revenge!"

Stroimir rode forward. His horse paused in the hoof-marks of great Sharaz on the Stone of Marko.

"Brothers," he said, "I am a Haiduk, like my father and like you. I have no wealth but my right, my strength and my faith in the True God. I bring you my son, in whose veins runs the blood of Vlastimir: Miloutim, my hope and yours. Will you follow us? Will you help us to revenge and victory? Will you seat an Alberian at last upon the throne of Lazar, and heal the wounds of Kossovo? I stand on the Hill of Marko: it is time for his sword to fall; time for the Vila to waken the hero, and the killer of tyrants to come forth. I will grasp that sword, and mount the dauntless charger, Sharaz, and dethrone the alien! Will you follow, brothers? Will you strike for glory and revenge, and for your country's freedom?"

"Stroimir!" the Haiduks thundered. "Let us take the oath of brotherhood! Forever for thee and with thee!"

The moon shone dazzling on a field of bare and brandished blades.

CHAPTER VI

SECRET INSTRUCTIONS

"A young man, be his merit what it will, can never raise himself; but must, like the ivy round the oak, twine himself round some man of great power and interest. You must belong to a Minister some time, before anybody will belong to you."

LORD CHESTERFIELD.

THE Premier of Alberia was sitting alone in his cabinet at Zarilov. He had hardly closed his eyes since the news of the outbreak, eight days before, had reached him: he possessed a faculty of sleeplessness which was at times invaluable. Though cool and keen diplomacy had warded off the possible bad consequences of the frontier complication, a new preoccupation made the Premier's undecipherable face more like a pallid mask than usual. His attitude was subtly charged with expectation. Seated before a massive desk, whose pigeon-holes and drawers were filled with scrupulously tied and noted papers, Fokshany looked out across the Danube and the Save towards the plains of Hungary. His glance slipped straight as an arrow between his eyes' concealing lids, and seemed to cross the spring-touched plains, unseeing, to be plunged in the horizon's blue beyond. The horizon, earth's division from the infinite, has strange enchantments for a speculative mood. Fokshany's mood was speculative, passing from the subject of a father's special powers reappearing in his son, to the question whether tools work

best for gain or fear; a wide round of conjectures. On the Premier's still lips hovered the shadow of a smile.

"It is always safe to trust a man as far as his interest will take him, but beyond that you go at your own peril."

As the thought crossed his mind, his eye lit on his Ikon, in a corner of the room. It was the picture of a saint on gold, set in a gilded frame according to the Slavic manner; the saint of the family, whose day was joyously observed instead of individual birthdays. Fokshany's patron was Saint Vitus, whose day the Alberians call Vidov-dan, "the day of seeing."

"Holy Vidov," murmured Fokshany, "thy gift is cruel, when we turn it upon human nature. There, clear-sighted, we must ever see too much. . . . Yes, even when our son's heart is the subject!"

At the instant his keen hearing caught a roll of wheels upon the broad stone slabs which paved the better streets—the work of reclaiming these from dust, mire, and a dangerous unevenness had been begun by the late king.

"Vassilio" . . . Fokshany murmured gently, glancing at the Ikon with a subtle smile, again. "Now, Vidov aid me!"

A minute later, with a clink of spur, Vassilio Andrassy entered.

"Be seated, Captain," said the Premier; half-turning in his large worn chair, he met the young man's brilliant smile. While he seemed to look through papers, he was thinking, "He is very like his mother—handsomer, perhaps."

Vassilio leaned against the mantelpiece, above which hung the late king's portrait, one of several royal gifts: a hand on his hip and the other on his sabre's lion-headed hilt of gold, his was a striking presence. His white coat, belted and frogged with

gold, showed off a slight but well-poised figure, while a sable-collared short cloak, richly frogged, was caught across his breast with a gold-clasped band of sable. He had tossed aside his cap, in whose sable band gleamed the figure of Alberia's crowned lion, and above which a tall aigrette of white osprey rose, and was glancing at his perfect leg and foot. The face was spirited, petulant, and haughty; nose arched, chin cleft, lips full, moustaches pointed, eyebrows raised but straight, and heavy-lidded amorous eyes a-sparkle with unfocussed energy. He was vain as a peacock, and handsome as one. There was a feminine suggestion in his rich dark colouring, the smooth curves of his cheek and jaw, his white hands and small feet, which made Fokshany, as he turned, think again—

“He is very like Mileva. . . .”

The Premier's thoughts were always his own secret, and never more entirely than now. He shifted his chair a trifle, leaned back like a man who knows the value of each moment of repose, and opened the interview.

“Things are as usual in Jadar, Captain Andrassy?”

“Yes, Count, dull as ever,” with a petulant turn of the head. “I hoped,” his quick eyes flashed, “that I should have been ordered to the frontier.”

“Tut, tut! young blood!” rebuked Fokshany, not without a secret impulse of indulgence. “Affairs of state are managed by the brain of men whose blood is ice, not by the arms of handsome lads whose blood is fire. We have other uses for you,” he continued, watching the colour deepen in the brilliant vexed face. “But what of your appointment?”

Vassilio threw back his head, a characteristic gesture in which pride and satisfaction mingled.

“I know whom I must thank for it,” he answered,

with a sudden spontaneous and fascinating smile. "I am deeply indebted to you, Count Fokshany," and he made a graceful bow.

"I have thought," said the Premier, negligently eyeing him with that masked glance which had such sure magnetic power, "that your abilities might lead you to excel even more in diplomacy than arms."

"Diplomacy?" Vassilio's eyebrows lifted.

"Yes, diplomacy: the science of outwitting others. You are fond of outdoing those about you: to outwit them would amuse you better still." Fokshany himself showed a diplomatic smile—polite, unfeeling, unrevealing. His masked glance still examined narrowly Andrassy's changing face.

"Well, Count," said the young man, laughing, satisfaction in his voice, "as King Waldemar's aide-de-camp, of course I shall need some powers of diplomacy. Fortunate for me," he smiled, with another bow as graceful as his manner, "that my model is yourself."

"Mileva had that sidewise falcon-glance to see how her shots told," thought the Premier. "Boje mili! I should never have remembered it again until we met in—Paradise! . . . And so you think you can do credit to my school, if I choose to teach you, Andrassy?"

"Of course, Count Fokshany!" cried Vassilio, with charming and audacious confidence in life and his own powers. They remained face to face through a long pause, during which the Premier's narrow and secret gaze seemed asserting its coercive force.

"In the school you have already passed through," said Fokshany slowly, "did they teach you to obey?"

"Of course!" replied Andrassy, with a swift recurrence of his restiveness at discipline's remembrance.

"In the game of life we must all obey, if not man, then circumstance. It is well both to learn how to obey another and to know how to command oneself."

The young man blushed, and bit his lip again as he felt his headstrong blood betray him. Fokshany watched him, the few deep lines controlled in his ivory mask.

"If I make you my pupil, Andrassy, shall you know how to obey? I shall guide you, as I have always done in the past, to your best interest."

Vassilio, as if constrained by the eyes close-fastened on his face, looked up.

"Yes, Count Fokshany."

"It is well. Now let me give you your first lesson. Diplomacy's alpha and omega in one word: Silence."

Andrassy's brilliant eyes were riveted by the Premier's mysterious regard: he stood like a stag at gaze, between mistrust and hardihood.

"Silence not only on your projects, but your moods; regarding both the past and future; touching your hopes, your disappointments, and your preferences, especially your personal loves and hatreds. I say loves and hatreds, because likings and dislikes do not exist with you: young blood, hot blood—a dangerous possession; it will make you tool, not master, yet, Andrassy."

The Premier sat so still, and seemed so calm, that Vassilio found no answer. The cold of experience and age, of pale lips, and eyes whose glitter, not their colour, he distinguished, numbed his energetic spirit.

"Silence," proceeded Fokshany impassively, "in every relation of life: with your brother, your father, your friend, your colleague, your son, your wife, your mistress. Above all, the two last, for women will fish for a secret even in the depths of hell, and use all heaven's arts to gain it."

For the first time in his life Vassilio saw a smile curl the cold lips of the Premier.

"True, Count!" cried the young man, released from his constraint, with a peal of ringing laughter.

"At Königslust," said Fokshany, "you will have a woman to deal with. She is wild as the wind, yet you must master her; and beautiful, yet must not master you. I should forbid you to adore her, if I did not know that all forbidden fruits are sweet. So I tell you only to beware of meeting a successful rival in the King."

Vassilio's vanity was instantly aroused: a new look flashed into his eyes. This expression of petulant perverseness faded as it came, however, and surprise succeeded it.

"But his—wife is only just now dead!"

"It is to prevent another *morganatic* marriage that you go to Königslust to-day. You are young, handsome, clever, and spirited, and ought to win your game. If you cannot—" Fokshany shrugged his shoulders slightly, with an air of exquisite disdain. Vassilio changed his posture with a clink of spurs and sabre: he grew crimson to the brows.

There was a pause.

"It is well," said the Premier. "Silence, Andrassy, silence: you are learning the great lesson. You must teach your eye and nostril silence too. Besides the Countess Ilona you have another foe to reckon with: the King himself.

"The King?"

"Yes: it is a question more complicated still, though not so much so for yourself. I wish you to establish an ascendancy over him; court his confidence, obtain his trust, captivate his heart, divert his mind: in fact, you must grow indispensable. Since the death of the late King, and his own—marriage, King Waldemar has shown a tendency to liberal ideas entirely unbecoming his position. It is your mission to divert his attention to pursuits better suited to his age and place than mischievous reform-projects and studies of social and political economy

best left to his advisers; questions which, until he fell into the hands of Fredegonde, he never interfered with."

"You will give me time, Count Fokshany, to carry through these Herculean labours?" Vassilio's face wore what, upon a woman's, half-perplexed, half-flattered, would have been a pout.

"Forty-eight hours will decide it," said the Premier maliciously. "The whole depends on happy first impressions."

"But what impression can I make upon the King in the midst of his mourning?" cried Vassilio.

"A woman's loss is not a kingdom's," said Fokshany, with an acrid touch of special cynicism; "and when one influence is ended is another's best imaginable hour to begin."

CHAPTER VII

"SAVE HIM!"

"Post equitem sedet atra cura."

HORACE.

AFTERNOON spread purple on the hillsides, drew tree-shadows long across the springtime grass, stole in milder blue upon the river's morning gold, and set the birds which mid-day dazzled, singing. Vassilio, arrived from Zarilov eager as Phaeton about to mount the Sun God's car, leapt on the horse awaiting him, prepared to ride to Königslust. There was spring in the April air, and life in the young man's veins, which mixed, with youth's eternal harmony. All the ambition, curiosity, and pride which Fokshany had aroused in him were seething, as the sap was stirring in the trees of the spring woods, and love in the shy hearts of woodland creatures. Love, too, was vaguely in Vassilio's thoughts; and, clearer, rivalry and triumph. The stir of fresh experiences, new hopes, and heavier responsibilities aroused him: this change from the dull garrison at Jadar was fulfilment for his dearest dreams. The thud of hoofs seemed triumphal music of forward-bearing fortune; the smiling afternoon conspired with a troop of eager fantasies to spur him on. Unthinking, in the summer-time of happy egotism, he broke into a song. . . . His ringing tenor woke echoes in distant gorges, far defiles. The

nearer hillsides flung back his voice, as if the Vili, the nymphs of wood and mountain, laughing, answered. His guide turned to look, and Vassilio's careless eyes met the forester's.

"What is the matter?" cried Andrassy, amused at the fellow's solemn face. "Art thou afraid I shall wake some giant of the mountain in his cavern?"

"Gospodar," replied the forester, "not that. Our hearts are heavy to-day."

"For the death of thy mistress, no doubt," said Vassilio lightly: no mourning could shade his elation. Jephthi lifted his hand and bowed his head.

"Not that alone. King Waldemar is missing."

"What?" cried Andrassy. "Man, you rave!—the King—"

"His Majesty has been in retirement since our lady's funeral, with none but his physicians near. There are rumours that his mind is shaken: God forbid!—but so the household whispered. At sunset yesterday came an order to saddle his favourite horse; and I was commanded to attend him close, and never let him out of sight. He came down pale as death, and even scarcely seemed to see me; but vaulted on horseback with a single spring, as usual, and galloped away. I followed till night had fallen; followed fast till the moon was up; we rushed through the silent country like the Wild Huntsman and his crew. Follow, follow, follow, the white moon mounting, the King's face ghastlier pale than moon's or risen corpse's; follow, follow, the wild beat of hoofs re-echoed, like Szargol's legions at our heels. At last I thought I was dreaming, and tried to break the spell of the nightmare; but follow, follow, the moon's white face above, the King's white face before, forever. . . . The hills were bluish, in veils of moonlight, the valleys misty and pallid; the earth was ghost-

like with wreaths of vapour drowned in mysterious radiance. . . . It seemed to me we had left the living world, and were galloping through a dead one: I almost thought that the King, with his corpse-like face, was dead, and I going mad at living. I began to wonder when we should meet those shapes which send lonely travellers wild: the phantoms of brides who have died before marriage, and dance at the cross-roads, dressed in their wedding-clothes, rings afire on pale fingers. Crowned with garlands and decked with strange jewels, their long hair floating, their eyes bright as marsh-lights, these spectres, laughing horribly and irresistibly beautiful, dance ever more madly as they feel the hour coming when they must go back to the grave. . . . Follow, follow, till moon and earth and sky and stars seemed false, and I thought myself devil-rid, forced to pursue a corpse through endless night. At last we returned, I found, to a path which leads up behind Königs-lust; the path they followed in taking our lady's body to the summit to be burnt. The King struck into it, under the trees, winding round the mountain and upward: I followed, wondering whether the sun was quenched and this night would last forever. The woods were ghostly and vague with their tall white trunks and trembling leafage, and suddenly I remembered the path was cloven half-way up by a chasm. Hardly recalled, when we came upon a little level, silver in the moonlight; beyond which the gap lay, black as hell's mouth-hole, another level again beyond. I ventured to address the King, and he turned his face towards me—a face like death. . . . I crossed myself, for I thought of pale vampires found lying so still in their opened graves, through whose hearts, which must still have blood, our village elders drive a sharp stake of the white-thorn, consuming their guilty bodies to ashes the river bears swift away.

I summoned my courage again, but he looked at me silently with his hollow eyes, and my tongue seemed cast of lead. . . . And then, before I could speak or move, he had spurred his horse at the gap, and was over; the moon shone full on me standing alone, while he rustled away through the leaves and the shadows. All of a sudden my voice came back, and I shouted loud, setting my horse at the chasm. But nothing could stir him; he smelt the flood in the mountain's bowels, and planted his hoofs and neighed till the echoes went frantic. . . ." The forester dashed his hand across his sweat-beaded brows, and started forward. "I went back alone to the castle, Gospodar, I went back alone."

They rode on a distance in silence. Vassilio was too amazed to speak. This inundation of mystery and night, ill-omened, had swallowed up his sunny mental landscape. He had come with youth's comedy-mask in his hand, with rivalry, laughter, intrigue, at his beckon; and now grim tragedy faced him, madness, mourning, love, and death. . . . Suddenly hoof-beats were heard, still distant, multiplied by the echoes' whim.

"They may have news of the King!" exclaimed the forester, spurring forward. Vassilio followed, still half aghast, but braced with curiosity. The valley ahead of them made a trend which hid the coming horsemen. Their own horses' tramp kept the noise of the others faint until each was close at hand, but before they could gain a view of the valley's higher stretch, those beyond were upon them. From behind the granite bastion which shut the prospect out, a horseman galloped, nearly unseating Jephtimi, whose path he crossed. Vassilio's horse, checked abruptly, reared; but Andrassy recognised the deadly pallor, burning eyes, and rigid features of the King. Before he could start in pursuit, a woman, mounted,

thundered across his path : her unbound hair like a golden cloud, her face despair and defiance. Under black delicate frowning brows, her eyes were fast on the King. She flashed by, lips set, nostrils dilated, white as her horse and her habit. Vassilio, arrested, seemed turned to stone, looking after her down the valley ; until the forester, spurring his horse, followed, clamouring :

“ To the King ! ”

The others were far ahead, galloping onward, riding like centaurs both. Waldemar's swing in the stirrups was splendid. Ilona rose to the pace like a bird. Vassilio, seized with the lust of pursuit, urged his powerful horse to the utmost ; who was she ? why was it she, not a man, who seemed about to take him ? . . . His horse had passed the breathless guide's, and was gaining upon the pursuer's, stealing up to this beautiful demon, whose face he must see again. His blood was rioting through his veins in the chase's haste and ardour : it seemed a lifetime's lagging round before he could reach her side. . . . He was nearer now, and could see that the horse of the King, though swift, was jaded : even its thoroughbred strength and fire could not support it long. . . . And then, that cloud of hair as blond as the sun which burnished its ripples ! that beautiful devil pursuing the other—he longed, while his blood sang loud through his brain, till it half drowned the hoofbeats, to catch that bright banner, and turn the face he was seeking to his, away from the man pursued. He glanced ahead fiercely at Waldemar's figure. A shriek broke the spell of the mountain silence, scattering echoes loud and far. Vassilio saw that the King was thrown, while his horse lay a huddled heap.

The woman reached him, flung herself down on her knees beside him, lifted him upward with arms which felt no weight. He had fainted, and blood

flowed fast from his temple: she tried to staunch the wound with her hands, her lips, her hair; his head on her bosom, uttering low short cries. Vassilio leapt from his horse beside them.

"I know how to bind it up," he said.

"Save him! save him!" was all she could answer, steeping tress after tress of bright hair in the precious blood it could not stay.

Vassilio, tearing his handkerchief up, gazed fixedly at her, mouth set, breathing hard.

"This is the woman Fokshany spoke of; the woman who loves the King. . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

MARA, THE OUTCAST

"Thrice blessed in thy joy or in thy love,
Thrice cursed of thy race, thou art ordained
To share beyond the lot of common men."

THOMAS HOOD.

MARA, strong-armed and round-bosomed, lifted the water-jar up on her head, and turned to go to the well, like some dusky and gorgeous-hued caryatid, alive, and draped in rags, not marble. Her neck, proudly rising, had marble's strength, her low broad brow, its smoothness; but under black eyebrows, eyes gloomy as midnight glowed with angry fire. Loubitza was scolding loud in the house behind, amongst her children; stout Loubitza, who clacked like a hen all day, and span as fast as she scolded.

"Gipsy! bastard! outcast!" followed the girl with the jar on her stately head, and the words struck sharp as arrows. She heard the children scream them, laugh them, lisp them, at her too. She gazed at the broad declining sun, whose beams were flooding the valley, and wished she could follow him down to the dark of the underworld where the pale dead sleep in forgetfulness and silence. The sun gazed back as steadfastly, with an amorous enfolding glow, as if the source of life caressed this creature full of life and beauty.

On she went, with her even pace, her sweeping eye-

brows black and bent; her long hair, loose on the coarse chemise, reached half-way down her tattered skirt. The house, spreading hive-like from a central chamber, with its stork's nest on the roof, and its adjacent huts for poultry, sheep, and oxen, pigs and horses, lay behind her: she passed its guardians, two monster mastiffs, chained, which leapt forward to lick her hand. A stork flew over her head on his way to his mate in the conical nest on the roof. Mara paused in her bitterness, wondering "Why do the storks come back?" The scattered village lay in a valley guarded by sharp and mist-bathed peaks, a green expanse down whose smiling field ran a swift clear mountain stream. It was the hour when the men came home from the meadows, or left their long day's work, and when the girls drew water in their jars and met together at the well. Mara could see a group of them in the distance: Bosilika must be there with her friends, for she had started away from the house when Loubitza began storming. She must have some reason for hastening to the meeting-place, thought Mara, for otherwise she would have listened to the rating of the "Gipsy," well amused. Perhaps it was to talk about the Feast of the Kralize, when she was to be Queen in the procession; perhaps it was to chatter about Stroimir's son, for whom she made Guamar so unhappy. The frown grew blacker: Mara sent a long look of defiance where the girls' white garments fluttered and gleamed in the beams of sunset. What had she to do with them, or they with her? They were as near akin to her as the proud white mincing pigeons to the famished kite nailed dead by his wings to the door. They feared, and she—she hated!

Five minutes later, she strode through the group, disdaining to skirt round and thus avoid them. There was Bosilika, roguish and radiant, fingering a

tress of tawny hair. She was to be Queen Kralize in the procession, and knew herself already queen of two strong hearts, so her glance and smile had all the pretty insolence and sweet caprice of beauty twice beloved. She wore no head-dress but her pride of hair and one bright rose to grace it: soft, slender, and supple, she bore no resemblance to Mara, though old Lazar's favourite grandchild, and her cousin.

"Has Loubitza done yet?" she asked, amid the silence which had fallen when the other neared the staring group.

"You will find out when you go home, no doubt," returned Mara, drawing her water. The rest tittered, glad of a hit at the tawny-haired beauty who was too beloved and too bewitching, but still restrained by hate of the gipsy outcast whom they grudged the petty triumph.

"Is that the way you speak to Maxim, to make him ask us to let you have a place in the procession?" asked Bosilika, twisting her lovelock lightly, and blushing like her rose.

This, then, was what she had gone early to the well to tell the rest of them! The others began laughing, loud insulting laughter, full of contemptuous suggestion.

"She in the procession! What would she walk on? She hasn't a sandal to her foot!"

"Fine she would look beside us in our feast-dress!"

"The Gipsy walking with me—!"

"Maxim had better walk with her himself—to the Papst's, if he thinks her worth it."

"No occasion for that," sneered another. "Her mother never thought a wedding needful!"

Mara had sprung to her feet, oversetting her half-filled jar, which broke. "Maxim—" she gasped. "He asked *you*—for *me*?"—first scorn, then blazing anger. "Do you think I would walk in the proces-

sion with you all? you gnats! you wasps! you gad-flies! He asked—for *me*? When? Where? Speak, Bosilika! . . . You will not? . . . You lie, then, and he never asked!"

The rest were murmuring loudly; one struck at her; one tried to lay hold of her strong shoulder, and was flung aside; some shrieked "Gipsy! bastard! outcast!" as stout Loubitza had done. Bosilika paled a trifle, but twisted her tawny tress, and spoke again.

"Look at your broken jar!" she said. "Shall you take it home to Loubitza?"

"Yes!" cried the rest, as Mara glanced at the shattered shards, like a startled stag, then spurned them with her naked foot, and stood superb in her defiance. "Yes, Loubitza will beat the devil out of her when she gets her home—her and her broken jar!"

Before Mara could speak, or spring at her offender, a voice cried behind her, puffing, breathless:

"Daughters! daughters!"

A moment more, and the village Papst, with his comic solemn face, his fat long body and short legs, prodigious beard and round eyes, was amongst them.

"Daughters—!" The girls began to turn away, some half defiant, some abashed, as he stood puffing. One, the youngest, put her finger to her mouth, in memory of her childhood's tribulations. "What, what, what!" cried reproachful Sima, one hand on his stomach, the other shaking two pudgy fingers in reproof, not benediction. "Hooting like owls again? Where are my doves, my pigeons? For shame! For shame!" He shook his head, with its tall black kalpak towering above it, and puffed anew with indignation in his food-stained time-stained travel-stained black gown.

"She broke her jar because I told her that Maxim

has asked us to let her take a place in the procession." Bosilika, facing the Papst with the confidence of beauty, though the good man's simple eye for beauty was centred on his fat Popadia at home, spoke out for her abashed companions. "None of us said no, but she flung her jar down—poor Loubitza's jar, that is, the very biggest in the house—and broke it, and refused to come. She said that we were wasps and gadflies . . ." with a sweet, protesting pout.

"And so you are, to her! For shame! What, what! Will you ever set upon the orphan, like a pack of wolves upon a lamb? And ever be like thorny roses which belie their bloom with pricks? Daughters! Brotherly love, sisterly love, love everywhere to everyone, I tell you: if you wish to live blessed in the sight of the True God and free from Szargol and his demons!"

The girls had drawn together at a little distance, eyes cast down, all but Bosilika: they heard the exhortation, but they did not see the Papst tug at the cross upon his breast, for he believed in evil spirits.

"Come with me, Mara," said Sima mildly. "We ought to return good for evil. Come, daughter; and peace be with those who have offended, and peace with those who shall forgive."

Mara bent her proud neck, and followed him away from the subdued group by the broken jar. Her wild soul was prostrate in gratitude and love before the homely pious superstitious Papst.

"Come, come!" exclaimed Sima, when their steps had left the well behind. "Be not unhappy, my child: the unhappy are the sinning, not the sinned against."

Mara was silent, her heart too full of bitterness and yet a keener pain than all, to speak.

"The world is hard," he continued earnestly, as

some far-travelled pilgrim, though his fifty years had all slipped by within the peaceful valley. "When thou'rt as old as I, thou wilt know better how to face it, with the help of the True God."

Mara wrung her hands: his pious accent could not calm the strong rebellion of her youth.

"As old as you are, Father Sima!" she broke out. "What years on years of suffering—what insults—pain—humiliation, before them! No, I could not bear it—I should throw myself into the swift ill-omened Lom!"

"Into the river!" he cried, two trembling and admonitory fingers pointed at her. "Thou'rt mad! The river!—nay, worse than mad: a demon is upon thee!"

"Father Sima," said Mara, "I sometimes feel indeed a devil *here*." She clasped her hands with a touching gesture of affliction on her heart. "I long to love and be beloved, to see kind faces smile when I come near them; and oh, to hold the children in my arms and feel their kisses—I but they jeer and run away. You spoke of love just now. My heart is full of love, so full that it will burst for want of outlet. . . . I have always been unhappy, but lately—it has grown too hard—too hard to bear!"

"Mara!" the Papst cried, fat hands waving in the air, for she, so proud, was weeping. They had reached a path that wound away along the gorge through which the valley-stream came rushing—the stream Ovchariza, the Shepherdess: he led her to a broad and seatlike stone, where she sank down under a storm of sobs, which wrenched her inmost being.

"Holy Powers!" muttered Sima, fingering his crucifix and staring up with round and starting eyes. "Defend us! protect us! cast out the spirit! Cast out the accursed demon!"

"I have tried so hard," gasped Mara, shaken like

a leaf through all her strength. "I have worked for Loubitza morning and night, hoping to please her, to earn a smile from her, or one kind word from Lazar. Useless! useless! Even Bosilika hates me, who is gentle to the rest, though I have never wronged her—ah, how happy she is, loved by everyone. . . . And I—!"

"Fie, fie!" cried Sima, half distracted. "What, girl! you must try and help cast out this spirit!"

"No, Father Sima, I am not rebellious now; I will not drown myself if you will only be as kind to me as you were there beside the well. Say 'daughter' to me, Sima: no one calls me daughter—no one ever did, but you, in all my life. . . ."

"Come, come, my dear, my child—why, daughter, then!—come, courage! wipe your eyes. What would the Popadia say to see you so?"

"Yes, *she* has never used me unkindly. It is my own blood who hate and spurn me; old Lazar, Loubitza, Bosilika—" she stopped.

"And what of Maxim?" the Papst asked, hoping to help her ease her burdened heart. Mara covered her face with the long black hair she dried her eyes on: she was blushing to the brows. Does he beat thee?" asked Sima, growing suspicious, as he heard another sob.

"No," Mara muttered, "no, no! He is kinder than anyone but you. . . . Father, why do they hate me so? I have never harmed them and I would have loved them so! I would have loved them so, if they had let me. They call me 'Gipsy' in scorn, and tell me my father was one of the gipsies who follow the feasts and play the kolo-music, and that my mother was false as I, and left her home for love of him. They say she came back dying, one Christmas night, with me in her trembling arms, when all were feasting and singing, and that old



Lazar shut her out. Why did they keep me, instead of killing me too? My life is only a burden. I have no future and no hope!"

Sima stood aghast, half self-reproachful: could duty done be ever wrong, a blunder? He well remembered that Christmas night, with the snow fast falling, and wassail cheer throughout the lonely valley. Every dwelling kept open house, all comers must be welcomed. "Christ is born!" the visitor said, and one answered, "God's peace! In truth He is born!" Sima remembered that white night well; from the welcome guests there was one thrust out, and a mother, poor as she of Bethlehem, found not even a manger for her rest. The Papst, on his way to Lazar's house, had met her there in the snow-storm; repulsed, abandoned, dying, while the taper, brought to table by each member of the then so numerous family, in sign of prayer and peace, was being collected by Lazar, the Glavar, the head of the house; and the shining sheaf, in token of the family's close union, put out in the grain-filled dish, where the bread, the Tshesznitza, lay hiding its fortune-bearing coin. Sima raised hands to the snow-blinded heavens, then wrapped her in his own old cloak and took her home. He remembered that night, for she died before dawn, and at daylight the Popadia stood at Lazar's door with a new-born child in her arms. . . . A long pause, broken once by the girl's voice sobbing, "Why is my life so hard?" and full, for the Papst, with doubts and fears, and wonder whether duty could misguide one.

"How do I know but I ought to have left her there in the snow?" muttered Sima. "Better, perhaps, thou hadst never seen the light, for some children are born vampires to be strangled, and those with cauls are born to evil, and some are born accursed! And yet, how could I leave her there to

die, when she clasped my knees and begged for mercy?"

While he stood pondering, wrestling with conscience, "How could I tell that her child was to be born a vampire or accursed?"—the girl spoke suddenly.

"Father Sima, you know many charms and exorcisms, and medicines made of moonlight-gathered herbs. Your mother was a witch—"

"Holy St. Jovan forgive thee, Mara!" cried Sima, invoking the potential village Ikon in his horror.

"A wise-woman, I mean. She cured the blow Lazar struck me with his spade the year she died, by some sweet balm; and that is why I always twine green garlands for her grave on the wintry Day of the Dead. She left you many strange secrets, Sima; recipes for philtres, verses of magic, reading the omens, interpreting dreams—yes, all the village knows how wise you are; and then your bullocks' skulls on poles in the garden to keep off evil spirits show it surely—"

"Mara!" the Papst cried, moving about as if the stones burnt through his sandals, "what, what! Be quiet! Raise not devils by such speech as this! Fie, fie! Beware! Shame! Silence!"

"Father Sima!" cried Mara, "devils? I meant to ask you a favour."

"What was it, daughter?" Sima ceased to pat his stomach in distress, and shuffle.

"Have you no charm," murmured Mara, eager, yet subdued, "no charm to soften hard hearts, and make them beat more kindly? How precious are kind words upon kind lips!"

"Would that I had, child! I would give it thee, poor innocent, in spite of—" he broke off and peered about him.

"None, Sima, none?" cried Mara, with a wail like

some hurt animal lamenting. "What shall I do? I had thought you might help me, and at last unhappiness has made me bold enough to ask. I work and am patient through words and blows; I never have complained; yet they treat me worse than the oxen at the plough, or the dogs that guard the door. . . . I hoped you could help me—how long I hoped! I thought the True God might have pity. . . . Oh, Sima, must I always go unloved? Will they hate me always? Must I never dream of hope and home? . . . No hearthside of my own! no husband! ah, no children in my empty arms! . . . My heart is breaking!"

CHAPTER IX

THE COUNTESS ILONA

“Ich zitterte, ich selbst,
Vor dem erhabnen Schreckbild dieser Tugend.
Ein höhres Wesen ragt sie neben mir.
In ihrem Glanz erlösch' ich. Ihrer Schönheit
Miszgönnt' ich diese hohe Ruhe, frei
Von jeder Wallung sterblicher Naturen.

Ja—laß mich deinen Engel sein!”

FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER.

ILONA, pale with excitement, fatigue, anxiety, and eagerness, resolutely took her place at the bedside of the King.

“I found him,” she said to the disciple of Gadatz, who had unconsciously become impressed by his colleague with a sense of distrust and dislike of the Countess, which her beauty half defeated. “I sought him, I found him, I brought him home, and I am going to nurse him back to life. You say he will die. He shall not die. I swear to you that I will save him.”

She was kneeling by the King's unconscious figure, passing and repassing her firm white hand across his brow with a soothing motion, which stilled at last his blind unresting fret.

“Look, he is quiet. Leave him to me.”

She rose, and turned full on the physician, with that air of sweet authority and gracious power which suit so well a woman's sacred office by the sick-bed, the triple charge of watcher, nurse, and comforter.

Theodosi was mild and malleable, and now obeyed her will's strong order, as earlier he adopted the suggestion of Gadatz against herself, and felt impersonal antipathy.

Vassilio fumed away the evening in a rage, amongst his new companions in the great saloons below, taking care, however, to observe Fokshany's lesson—"You must teach your eye and nostril silence too." He carried himself with grace and confidence; charmed the women; conciliated the men, who had at first sight judged his vital youth too brilliant; flattered the veterans; dazzled the young girls; found means to leave each person well contented. Fokshany, had he seen him, would have recurred to the problem of inherited abilities, and possibly concluded that an able statesman's son may become a diplomat as able.

"The Countess," said a tall stiff soldierly personage, whose weakness for refighting his old battles was well known, especially before some fair spectator,—“the Countess has that matchless dower of woman, sympathy.” He delivered this impressively and sentimentally, his decorated chest thrown forward, ignorant that himself had been her target when she said, “If you can persuade a vain man that you are incapable of flattery, you have him at your mercy.”

“She is too brilliant to be sincere: I am always afraid of her.” This was the verdict of a portly baroness, whose figure the Alberian indoor dress did not improve, with its full skirt and bell-sleeved Turkish jacket, fitting to the waist behind, gold-braided half-way up the seams, and opening in front upon a fall of lace or an embroidered vest, while the hair is coiled in a long plait round a low rich-tasselled fez, or round a placque composed entirely of pearls. “However, I suppose it is her way, though I don't like it. The General always calls her sympathetic—that is *his* way.

I think her selfish to the core. Men never see these things when there's a pretty face to hide them," laughed the Baroness complacently. "But that's their way, you know," she added, with a chuckle and her usual explanation.

"The way of those who see with the eyes alone, and not with our true eyes, the heart and mind, madame," rejoined Vassilio.

The dark girl, whose lover Ilona had stolen and flung aside, replied only, "She is cruel."

As for him she had lost, Arseni, he answered feverishly and fully.

"She has the eyes of a dove, and the claws of an eagle; the voice of an angel, and Lucifer's heart; the persistency of a savage on his enemy's trail, and the fickleness of a butterfly amongst flowers. Her creed is the single word, 'Enjoy!' She is sarcastic without mercy; friendly without faith; brave without pity for those weaker than herself; true to her whim, but not to her word; and full of damnable enchantments. They say she loves the King," he added, dropping his voice and forcing a laugh, the laugh of envy, deriding what it is unable to obtain.

"Beware how you say bad things of bad people," said Vassilio, laughing too.

It was midnight: he tapped lightly on the door of the anteroom to the King's chambers. Theodosi, who was watching, opened.

"I have come," Vassilio whispered, after graceful greeting and self-introduction, "to offer you my aid in watching through the night, and to ask after His Majesty."

Before he could either resist or reply, Theodosi found the door closed, himself and the officer seated, and a confidential atmosphere about them.

"With King Waldemar," murmured Theodosi, "the fewer his nurses and watchers the better—of course,"

in haste, "I could not refuse your esteemed assistance, Captain Andrassy. . . ." He halted a moment, perceiving too late that he had yielded unawares the point in question, then went on. "My senior colleague, and His Majesty's former tutor, Doctor Gadatz, has heretofore attended him, but during a terrible storm the other day, he was struck blind. He has since been unable to rise from his bed, but hopes to-morrow to do so, as the wish to approach his royal patient has, ever since his own calamity, become his foremost thought."

"Hush!" whispered Vassilio.

"He is delirious," muttered Theodosi. "She had made him quiet half an hour ago."

"Is the Countess as good a nurse as she is a horse-woman?" asked Andrassy.

"She is an angel of mercy," said the doctor. "She knows just what to do and leave undone." He passed through the great velvet curtains masking the door, and returned a minute later, while Andrassy was considering this latest definition of the woman who to-day had queened his thoughts. "There is nothing to be done," said Theodosi.

"Take half an hour's rest," Vassilio murmured, smiling. "I will watch, for I am broad awake. You see you need your strength, and ought to sleep when you are able."

"Perhaps so, Captain Andrassy," hesitated Theodosi, and five minutes later he was asleep in his arm-chair.

. . . It was two o'clock. The doctor slept his deep night's sleep, untroubled. The lights were low, and Vassilio stood at the curtains, always watching. He could see the profile of Ilona as she knelt beside the bed, knelt through hours with the devotion of a nun before her cross, of a woman by the man whom she adores. She held a nerveless hand within her own,

which she sometimes laid her fevered cheek upon as if to cool it, or splashed with sudden tears, or kissed as pain-racked martyr might the rood, with a rapture of caresses. Her eyes were on the face upon the pillow, which the bed's rich hangings hid from Andrassy; that face so pathetic in its exquisite capacities for joy and suffering. There she was reading the poem of love and death in letters of fire. The beautiful dreams of the dreamer, which fled, smiling back to him in farewell; the bliss of the poet whose white ideal beckons on where the dawn is breaking; the hope of the man to whom love is life, and whom life has left loveless and robbed, were there: all the ruin of happiness, and the edifice of despair. She read the mouth's nobility, the forehead's truth, the eyes' bright constancy forever searching: it was that wide gaze of the seeking soul, which never centred in fulfilment on herself, that left her weeping.

"The tears of that woman are blood and fire," thought Vassilio, always watching. "Blood which will call for vengeance, and fire which will burn to death."

Gadatz came next day to the bedside, leaning upon Theodosi and a guiding staff. With his black robes and white beard; his sightless eyes, in which the horror of the blinding flash remained; his solemn face, with its stamp of present age and death not distant; he seemed some venerable prophet come to utter warning words, absolve, condemn. . . . Ilona, standing beside the King,—a lioness by her mate,—sent a glance like hate's own through the brave quenched eyes as Gadatz, slow-footed, entered. Then, with a smile which Theodosi thought angelic, she advanced.

"Let me help you forward, Doctor: take my arm. No? Perhaps your staff will aid you better. Here



is the bed: I had a chair set for you near my own, beside His Majesty."

Every word displayed her empire there, and fanged with reminder his calamity.

"I thank you, Countess," said the old man. "I am glad to hear the King has a nurse so devoted as yourself."

"And a physician so attentive as Theodosi: he could not be more careful were he you, Doctor Gadatz."

"May I ask for a moment with the King—alone, Countess Ilona?" inquired the old man coldly. This fencing by the sick man's pillow seemed to him so trivial, incongruous, and futile.

"With pleasure," smiled Ilona, drawing Theodosi with her to the anteroom. "How sad!" she murmured, thinking, "At least I can compel him to endure my pity."

But enmity of hers was far from the old man's mind as he heard the heavy curtain fall behind them, and painfully gained his feet. He felt on the gold-worked satin coverlet, with shaking fingers, for his pupil's hand; that warm hand, generous with gifts, and still more precious friendship, faith, and trust. He found it, with its wedding-ring upon it, slightest of the fetters in which love had bound it: to the old man, all the pathos of humanity was in that nerveless empty hand. Gadatz felt the pulse. "That sight remains to me," he murmured, as the faint beats slowly passed. "Weak, weak; from a heart without hope to a brain which rebels at life. Faint, through a body whose every breath is a sigh for the soul's release. . . . Waldemar," holding the hand he had found, he searched for the well-loved face. "Waldemar, son of my heart, are you dying? and dare I bid you live?" Gadatz smoothed the soft fair hair from the forehead whose open grace he knew. "Cold,

very cold. Cold as old age, or youth unloved : chill as the king of both, the icy monarch, Death."

Midnight again, and past. The stars, like points of steel or ice, gazed down on the sleeping castle. Far below, the lake returned the moonless sky's reflection, gazing at the heavens, eye for eye, the mystery of life and death between them. Midnight again, and past ; mild Theodosi sleeping out his long half-hour while Vassilio watched.

Fever had followed stupor, and delirium supervened : a merciful delirium, at first, of love and peace ; a past of hope, a future of fruition. Ilona listened . . . "Fredegonde, Fredegonde—" beautiful, pure, compassionate, loving, lofty-souled, unselfish.

"She only!" muttered the rival. "She always! What, will he never forget?"

"Forget!" repeated the King, on a sudden. "What is there to forget?" He was gazing before him, into the shadows—leaf-shadows, he thought, of the early spring—while Fredegonde rode by his side. Ilona saw his hands' vague unrest, his eyes' uncertain glances : she looked at the watch ticking low and fast on the table, and poured out a soothing draught.

"Fredegonde, what is forgotten?" he murmured pleadingly, as Ilona slipped a strong arm under his shoulders and set the glass to his lips.

"Nothing, Waldemar, nothing. We are happy : I love you, you love me. We are happy, I tell you, as mating birds in the springtime woods to-day." He had drunk : she rested his head on her bosom, and leant her tear-wet cheek against his hair. "Sleep, adored ; we are happy—you and I, alone in the wide fair world. Sleep! If love is happiness, we are happy—happy . . . happy!"

Vassilio started as she sobbed the sweet lie out and clasped the weary head still closer. Had she been

mocking herself cruelly, or had she longed for one rich moment whose deceit could buy all truth? . . . The room was silent as a tomb: a tear fell on the King's brow, one more drop in pain's wide ocean.

"Waldemar, it is I, not she," murmured Ilona at last. "Can you not turn to the future? Think: the past is a fleeting dream, the future infinite opportunity. The past is all shadow, the future all light—adored! all hope, all love!"

Vassilio trembled as if a blow had been struck him. What a scene! To waste such treasure on a stone, a clod; a heart where another queened it, a brain where fever's fires burned! He followed the beautiful curve of her body from shoulder to heel as she knelt, flung forward; and hanging to the side that maze of hair, half loose, half coiled, gave her the last grace of seductive womanhood. "All light, all hope, all love!" . . . Vassilio began to hate his King. . . . As she ceased, a wan fury seized Waldemar.

"She is dead!" he cried. "She is dead!"

Ilona started to her feet.

"Accursed phantom, ever between us!"

Theodosi woke, alarmed, the King's loud cry in his ears; and rushed in, conscience-stricken, breathless, hair and beard on end. Vassilio drew back in the folds of the curtain, and watched, but now with eyes which burned.

The anxious night winged by on lagging hours towards leaden dawn. The fever raged, and the King was a demon where stupor had left him a corpse. Now he blasphemed, and now cursed death and life, the soul and pain; now, teeth set, tried to tear the bandage from his temple, with the grim strength of despair.

"Shackled, fettered, chained!" he raved. "Shackled, fettered, chained! Chained to the tyrant, life; to crowns and duties, false-souled men, an empty world,

by this!—by this! Off with the rag! Blood is the price of freedom: let it flow! . . . Fredegonde! What, do you command me still to wait and suffer? will you never call me back? Oh, weary, weary! All men turn towards me the same mask eternally engraven with a smile. . . . Fredegonde, where is your pity, your angelic pity? Is it lost in heaven? What have I done that I must suffer on this rack? shackled, fettered, chained, forever!”

“King Waldemar . . .” Ilona murmured, pleading, her soul in her eyes, as he sank back strengthless. But one wave spent, his nervous exaltation gathered fresh like angry ocean.

“Rest,” he muttered, “rest! forgetfulness! To turn my face away, and sleep! . . . The lowest wretch that crawls can rest, but I no more—my forehead is branded by a crown. It burns! Oh, tear it off, and with it life: let me go free at last! . . . What keeps me? This cage, the body, strong as steel—the gaol of petty nerves and sinews!—this, born to pain, old age, corruption, death, can trap a soul like mine! Down with the bars! Blood, blood—let life away, this death-in-life of mine, and then rest—rest—”

All Theodosi’s strength and Ilona’s were vain as children’s with the madman’s might. As his hands were struggling to the wound, Vassilio bounded in, and seized his wrists in iron fingers.

Four hours later, Waldemar was quiet, sunk in exhaustion’s depths; pallid, raving low to himself as if some alien force compelled his weariness.

“Will he never sleep?” murmured Ilona, white as a ghost after her swoon: she had slipped down inert in the coil of her hair when she saw the King was mastered. “Perhaps—” a wild thought thrust her through like a knife. “Theodosi, is he dying?”

"But you wish him to live!" Vassilio whispered in her ear. She caught at the thought.

"Yes, yes! I wish him to live . . ." she repeated; and then, "Theodosi, I can make him sleep." She rose. "Theodosi," she pleaded, "you and Captain Andrassy need rest. In the anteroom there are liqueurs: leave us awhile, and I will calm him."

She stood with her hand on the King's brow, and turned to them with such an air of sweet command and sweeter pleading that the doctor bowed in acquiescence and Vassilio smiled assent to hide his jealous rage. . . . They were gone. She began to pass her hand across his haggard brow, kneeling beside him, his own hand fast against her breast: could she not tear him from the shadows, pluck him from the power of the past?

"Waldemar," she murmured, "Waldemar. . . ."

To know he loved her, to make him happy, woo him back to life, what tenderness she would have lavished, what utmost sacrifice laid down! She longed to heal him body and soul; to be life's balm and perfume: why, when she loved him, should time for him hang heavy, and breath become a curse? She wished all good things for him passionately, with a savage lavishness, as she wished all ill to her enemies: a barbarian contrast, like her strength in love and hate.

"She is your past, but let *me* be your present, your future, my adored!" she whispered, as if he could hear, ever soothing with rhythmical strokes the fever of his forehead. "*I* have watched by you, nursed you, given you sleep when no drug could do it; I found you and followed you, spent with fever and famine far from your home. Am I not faithful as she, and as loving? Waldemar, ah, come back! Why do you leave the beautiful world for a grave, love's self for a phantom?"

He had grown quiet, his muttering ceased, with her pleading voice in his ear ; but suddenly, wan as a corpse-light, delirium's fire flickered up in his eyes.

"Good-bye," he whispered hoarsely ; "good-bye . . ." She thought he recognised her and was dying.

"No !" she broke in, springing up with a gesture of fury. "You shall not die for her, but live for me !"

"Farewell forever . . . farewell . . ." he muttered, the hiss of the pyre in his ears, living over the agony of a last good-bye, of the ultimate glimpse by crawling flames' reflections. Abruptly, while his hair stirred with a horror overwhelmed by joy as violent, he gazed at Ilona.

"She lives," he gasped. "I dreamed . . . all madness, all ! . . . You, Fredegonde ?"

The second after seemed a lifetime reeling by. He saw the candles' still flames paling ; dawn ; a face whose deadly pallor was the stamp of deadly pain ; eyes whose gaze seemed destiny's. . . . Delirium ceased. . . . What, face to face with life again ?

He swooned.

CHAPTER X

BESIDE THE FALLS

"Sie hoffen noch? Sie wagen es, zu hoffen,
Wo alles, alles schon verloren ist?"

FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER.

"**N**O hearthside of my own! no husband! ah, no children in my empty arms! . . . My heart is breaking!"

The outcast flung herself face down upon the stone, while the stream rushed on and hapless Sima lifted hands to heaven.

"Mara!"

The girl sprang to her feet. Not Sima's voice, but—

"Maxim!" she whispered, eyes downcast, neck bent, with a sudden glorious blush.

"My service, Father Sima," said the young man, respectfully saluting the Papst while he caught the girl by her hands and scrutinised her gravely. He had almost a mind to ask the fat and flustered Sima what had been the matter, what had wrung from her, so silent, those sobbing words which stirred him to the heart; but reflecting, as his solid wont was, for a moment, concluded it more fitting to demand of her himself.

"I came to fetch her home, Father Sima. With your blessing and permission, we will go."

"Willingly, my children." And the Papst, as they bent the knee before him, called a fervent blessing

on their heads. "Dobar stchast! Good luck to you!" he cried, as they turned to descend the gorge together.

"Da bog da! God grant it!" answered Maxim, looking back with his sweet but manly smile.

"Can it be that he *did* beat her?" murmured Sima, cogitating deeply by the stream. "She leapt, at his voice, like a frightened fawn—and yet I thought the lad too brave and gentle. . . . She has been ill-used; that is certain. . . . Well, he may have done it when possessed!"

"Mara, what hast thou there in thine heart to break it?" asked Maxim gently.

"Why should I tell you, Maxim Brankovich? What care you for my heart or my sorrows?"

His steadfast face was towards her, but she dared not turn and meet his eyes. He felt both wounded and glad, indulgent as towards some creature, over-loved yet unresponsive, which betrays emotion's earliest thrill.

"Hast thou a brother, then, Mara, to cherish and guard thee?"

"A brother!" she cried, startled.

"Brother in blood, or brother in God, hast thou a brother, Mara?"

"You know that no brother has ever been mine, to guard and cherish me, Maxim. Neither by birth nor twice-kissed through the garlands. Why do you ask the forsaken, the outcast, of brothers in blood and God?"

"Then who should be brother of thine but I? Speak, Mara, who? Do not walk with pride like those dark pigeons whose necks are rainbow, which preen superb in the sun. Who has dealt with thee gently? Who has ever spoken kindly to thee? Who has had thee aye in his heart, as the year has the promised summer?" He stopped, while the rash

bright stream rushed on, with his strong hands stretched towards her. "Who should be brother of thine but I, Mara; brother to guard and cherish?"

She went on firmly a pace, then another faltering, then stopped.

"Thou, Maxim . . .?"

He caught the hand which hung beside her, drew her to him unresistingly.

"Brother, Mara, and more than even brother's sacred name. Sister's name is dear, but I would call thee yet a sweeter. Think how I have tried to teach thy wild heart trust! Remember how I sought to gain thy grace with gentleness! Tell me thou dost not hate me, Mara! Tell me thou wilt be to me betrothed and bride!"

She leaned inert upon his strength, her proud head almost resting on his breast. As his long gaze of triumphant tenderness sank into her uplifted dreamy eyes, a spell seemed broken.

"Maxim, let me go. . . . You do not know what you are saying. You are mad!" She sprang from his arms, and stood beside the fierce cascade as if at bay. "One step nearer, and I will fling myself over the falls—there is peace to be found there! Peace, Maxim; sweeter than spring or love: 'twould be worth my while to seek it!"

Before he realised that she had left his hold, she was leaning over the foam-drift, one foot on a slippery ledge, one hand on a bending bough above her.

"Mara, come back!"

"To what? To jeers and blows? To hate and hardship? To Lazar, who struck me down like a slaughtered sheep with his spade? To Loubitza, who calls me Gipsy, bastard, outcast? To Bosilika, who loves one word of praise more than my life? Ha, ha, ha!" She laughed wildly, stretching one hand to the leaping spray.

"To me! Come back to me!" he exclaimed, half mad with the sudden danger. "Have I struck thee or flung thee foul words, Mara? Never! Come back, I say! Come back!"

"Maxim, thou'dst give me names sweeter than sister, names of affianced and bride . . ." She faltered, gazing below to the whirlpool whose white face a fleeting iris jewelled. "Never believe I despised and rejected them—I, who have loved them so dearly! Never believe I misprized thee—thou, who hast cared if I live or die. But the rest! Old Lazar, whose son and daughter thy father and my wretched mother were! Loubitza, who hates me; thy sister Bosilika . . . what would they say to thy bride? What brother have I to send me fitly in procession to thy home? What sister of thine would receive me with kisses? What child should I dress, when they jeer at my name? Who would seal my mouth with sugar, like the happy brides' who must only speak sweetly? Who would have patience to see me set the bread and wine and water on thy table, touch my distaff to thy walls? Maxim, thy home will never be mine, though I shed my heart's blood to buy welcome!"

"But thou'dst come if thou couldst? Thou wouldst care to be heart of my home and mother of my children? Speak, Mara! speak and come back to me—"

"Not a step nearer, or I go where even thou shalt never find me. . . . Why not? A sin the more, what matter when, as Sima says, I came into the world accursed! All my life has been a sin, or why has the True God punished me so cruelly? Even the hope that every girl dare tremble over, blush for, hope of happy love, has been my ban; for how can I love thee, one of the oppressors, to whom my birth makes me of race inferior? Look at this hair, these eyes,



black as the boding raven's breast, or fate's unkindness! My father was a Gipsy, Maxim—how canst thou wed with a Gipsy—outcast, as they call me every day? Thou art honoured now in thy home: choose some other betrothed, a pure-blooded bride of the valley, to bear thee stainless sons. For me, the darkness, old or new; the blackness of the grave or fate. . . . Forget me, I am accursed, born evil, like the night-shade you snatched out of my hand but yesterday. . . . Forget me. Some blow will cut the knot and give us peace at last, cure me of living, you of loving. . . . Forget me, Maxim; I am like a weed, a barren seed which brings no increase at the harvest. Thine is the sunshine, mine is the shadow; how can we walk, then, hand in hand? No, forget me! Let death decide it: the water is white as a winding-sheet. . . . Farewell! . . .”

Her fingers relaxed on the bough . . . she swayed forward. . . . A leap, and he seized her falling, and reeled back holding her swooned in his arms.

CHAPTER XI

THE FLUSH OF DAWN

"If thou holdest to this, expecting nothing, fearing nothing, but satisfied with thy present activity, and with heroic truth in every word which thou utterest, thou wilt live happy. And there is no man who is able to prevent this."—MARCUS AURELIUS.

BROAD day was shining on Königslust. Vassilio and Ilona had vanished like the troubled dreams of night from the King's chamber, and Waldemar roused, after a long, deep sleep, to find it afternoon.

"I must rise," he said. "Help me to do so yourself, Theodosi. I wish to see no one but Gadatz."

He was ignorant of the calamity which he himself had caused. Theodosi had been directed by Gadatz to prepare him for the truth, but trembled still to do so.

"Your Majesty must pardon me: he is not well."

"Not well?" A presentiment of evil laid leaden hold on Waldemar.

"His eyes . . ." continued Theodosi mildly, faltering a little.

"Gadatz is blind—?"

The sudden anguish of the King, who seized his arm in iron fingers, and this lightning grasp upon the truth, unnerved Theodosi.

"The night of the great thunderstorm he went to seek your Majesty. The lightning"—he stopped

dead, then lamely recommenced. "The doctor is an old man, sire, and his eyes—"

Useless the lie Gadatz had taught him with such care. Useless now, with Waldemar's unmoving face before him, white, distraught, remorseful, as the wretch who finds his victim was his benefactor or his father. The King turned his face to the wall, and communed long and bitterly with his own soul.

An hour later he had risen, and descended by a private stair to Fredegonde's apartments. His hand was on the secret spring of the panel which gave access to her chamber. A vertigo seized him: should he find her there? Rosy as Venus, her couch strewn with flowers, her sweet voice tuned sweeter to murmur his name . . . or white as her lilies, lips stilled, glances fettered, love banished, her bridal-bed turned to a bier? . . . He entered. The world seemed to reel away from him. Alone! He flung himself upon the empty couch.

The hour of sunset passed processional in pomp of scarlet, gold, and flame. Waldemar saw nothing but her changeless face, his wrung brows buried in her pillow. Night swept the sunset glory from the lake, and tipped with stars the mountain-summits; birds hushed, breeze dropped, and sky sphered earth in blue profounds of peace. . . . The King stirred: no guide, no sweet consoler more; all wrecked and passed away. And yet, a whisper from the past, which stirred him, in the heart of silence, like her voice new-heard.

"Listen: I will be with you when you suffer; I will be near when you despair. A day of pain seems everlasting if one does not dream of beautiful to-morrow: a life's unrest seems but a day's, if one looks to the eternal calm. . . . I know your weariness; I share your pain; but beyond it all I see, like a white dawn, reunion, peace. . . ."

The phrase died like a subtle strain of music, too ethereal for earth, and left him weeping ; weeping at last, the heavy tears which ease the heart, upon her sacred pillow. . . . The King rose from that bed, whose indefinable fragrance still intoxicated him, and flung the casement-window open to the night, whose coolness stole upon his forehead like a sigh of memory or compassion. Above the lake and the mountains, the stars moved remote in eternal procession.

"Sea of eternal night, silvered with swimming worlds! In all your vast, where is she? Life and love seem but a dream in face of death and thou. . . . Yet love—and love for her! It went so deep. Into the soil of a sterile life impregnated with the spring and craving for its beauty. This was beauty absolute: I saw the rainbow, and stretched my hand to reach down its supernal jewels. Everyone but I wore gems of love: I dreamed of the elusive opal bow. . . . My youth, my youth! That youth of the soul which, mortal, is fairer than immortality!"

A sigh in which hope, love, regrets, even youth itself, seemed ebbing, broke from him so faintly that the night-wind drowned it breathing by. Instead, words of Fredegonde's unbound his hands from tortured brows, and left him steadfast, fronting heaven.

"What of your people, who are also your children? your kingdom, which is also your country?"

"My kingdom . . . my people . . ." he murmured, as if he echoed memory: then "Her trust." He stood facing the mute array of night, all mystery and silence, aspiration akin to hope and prayer in his heart, soul-promise of dawn. "Her trust," he thought. "She left me a mission to fulfil; the consolation of a love as wide as heaven, love of the suffering. There is neither king nor people in the brotherhood of pain: only mourner and consoler.

There I can find new life; refine away the gross in my own nature till it soars to hers; at last I shall mix with the chill altruism of duty the tender altruism of love. Worship of her! Each pain soothed, counsel offered, help brought, a grain of incense on her altar; every problem solved, reform begun, right furthered, praise for her; ah, I will offer gentle words and deeds to her pure memory, like pale flowers. . . . Life, new life, aspirant ever, far above the thoughts and hopes of self: life universal, with a thousand hearts and brains and purposes and uses. Life beyond mine and love's, yet steeped with her undying memory; sweet through obedience to her wish, exalted by communion with her ideals. . . . Sympathy, sacrifice, and selflessness must be the keywords of our creed—ours, ah! still ours while her soul is wed to mine by all the past and future!"

He stretched his empty arms to the solemn night where she had vanished, only tomb of hers besides his heart; and pledged to the infinite mystery of dark and space and silence, with its missing key perhaps the key to other problems, those of life and death and pain, his martyrdom of self.

"For her sake . . ." he muttered. "For her, for her. . . ."

He turned and made his way across the chamber to the stair, and up into his own apartments. He dared not remain to strain tense faculties already cruelly enfeebled, or to sink in an inertia unworthy of his new resolve. It was his first endeavour towards self-control.

The sight of his own rooms, lighted and empty, wearing a new aspect since the death of Fredegonde, repulsed him. This luxury and beauty, charmed to fitness by her absent hand in days which to his soul seemed long ago—long? why, a lifetime past, with all its currents of event and circumstance—was

hateful. Crowned, and alone as any beggar in his realm! The reaction of his exaltation reached him. Alone! . . .

"Waldemar, son of my heart, where are you?"

He turned and saw Gadatz, one withered hand upon his staff, and one abroad and searching.

"Waldemar, I came to comfort you," he said, with an uncertain forward step.

"Gadatz!" cried the King, a double anguish in his voice, then threw himself upon the old man's neck.

CHAPTER XII

SOKOL THE FALCON

"If thou wert grim,
Lame, ugly, crooked, swart, prodigious."
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

"TO leave me the whole day long, and all for thy vanity, thou silly jade!" stormed Loubitza. "I, with the weaving, and the children, and the cooking, and the spinning, and the washing, and my cloth to dye for summer garments, and Lazar fierce as a wolf because the white draught-ox is ailing! And Father Sima to be served at table when he comes in the morning to bless it, as he promised, and drive out the devil that's possessed it. A plague on you wenches: you'd spend your lives smiling good-day to yourselves in a pail of water. And think thou thy hair will grow longer, or thy eyes grow brighter, or thou be fairer to set youths to cudgelling each other, because a dwarf a century old, and hideous as death, flings thee a rose? Ah, when thou'rt wedded for once, with a tail of brats like mine about thee, and a goodman to keep thee in thy place, thou'lt settle down, thou'lt settle down! Now it's a dragon-fly, thistledown, sunbeam; here and away, and hey found! and ho lost! What art thou good for? Only to turn the youths' heads and play Queen Kralize in the procession!"

"And that is why I want the rose," said Bosilika, smiling with coquettish malice.

"What dost thou say?" shrilled the matron. "Thou'lt get the rose because thou'rt vain and idle?"

"No, Loubitza, but because I want to wear it on my veil in the procession."

The widow in her passion dropped an earthen dish, which broke.

"The second in a day!" she clamoured. "First that accursed one who kicked the precious jar to pieces by the well, now thou—thou jay! thou cuckoo! thou faggot of vanities! . . . Holy Elias!" she cried, turning to the humble Ikon in the chamber-corner, "save the household goods from the prongs of devils, and our oxen and beasts from the claws of evil spirits! Look at my dish. Think of the jar, the dear jar, the beautiful poor jar that was so large, and now is lying dashed to pieces by the well! Ah, that Gipsy, that misbegotten monster that Szargol's self would disown! Thou shalt go to Sokol the Falcon and thy dwarf, Bosilika, when thou wilt. Then she shall work for thee and herself, all day, till her feet blister off— Ha, Mara!"

The outcast entered with Maxim, and flung at Loubitza a sparkling glance of defiance. She had heard the threat and the promise, and silently set about her household work.

The waxing moon was bright, and fairly midnight mocked the coming dawn. A figure stole from the houses' clustered shadow, passed the mastiffs, and ran towards the valley's open stretch. Sima might have taken it for vampire, witch, or vila, but the dogs knew Mara's footstep, and lay still. The valley seemed snow, the stream's bright ribbon flashing through it; but presently the figure reached the hillside, and was gone. Bats and owls, moon-eyes and forked pinions, remained abroad while the peasants slept; but these,

and perhaps some wraith of Sima's dreaded bands, were all which followed Mara.

"Oh, I must win it!" she breathed to herself. "The rose!—for Maxim's sake. She may be Queen Kralize to-morrow, but I will be Queen of queens!"

The gipsy's heart beat madly with greed of triumph and heat of love. Maxim her suitor! Had a fairy fetched the silver moon from heaven, or the golden sun, for her, she were less rich. There were stones in the path, but she bounded on like an oread to her faun. The dew was silver and cold in the grass, but her fleet feet never felt it. Forests rose sombre, with menace of blasted tree and heart of darkness: she clasped the token which Sima had blessed and hung on her neck as a child. Far in the aisles of the woods hid the screech-owl, ghastly, uttering bale and ban: dared she go forward?—she prayed to the Virgin, a mother who had suffered like her own. What if the way were lost, in the dusk of the shadowy legions of pines? if the others came up and went back while she wandered? if, far astray, she should starve? Mara called upon Jovan, the saint of the village, whose day was festal; a fair young saint who could understand, not Elias, the Ikon of the household, whom she hated. Thus, protected from ghosts and ghouls, witch, demon, vampire, and all mischances, the young queen-moon for a friend in the tree-tops, Mara went happily on. Happily, sadness flung to the winds, with wrath for the past and fear for the future; happily, love at her side and joy in the van, light-beckoning onward. She looked at the glow-worms, earth's jewels of night, and at heaven's jewels, the stars, with a bounding freedom of pulse and step, all youth's intoxication. The dwarf would give her the rose of roses, crown her Queen of Beauty, for how could fortune refuse this little grace, which had lavished on her Maxim's

love? And besides, she remembered hearing that only once had the rose been given — once before in old Ranko's life—and that was to her mother.

The dwarf himself was a mystery, with his hoary hundred years, his earthy face, and eyes said still to be weirdly bright as bale-fires. Writhen and gaunt, strong and fierce, and hideous as a demon, he had lived for two generations far from any human face. Where Sokol, the mountain-castle, called Sokol the Falcon, perched high on the dizziest crag, and the inky Lom roared down at the iron feet of precipices; where mountains cleft apart in chasms unbottomed, and the rock in all its jagged rifts was black, the dwarf lay hidden amongst ruins of what once had been a stronghold of the country's kings. Toppling towers and battered walls; turrets where the dark bats hung in lines and owls were nesting; chambers, roofless and floorless, with their gaping windows ivy-bowered; a hall between whose mighty pavestones little snakes slipped through the grass; a court no hoof had echoed in since Kossovo; huge stalls where Sharaz might have stabled; buried dungeons like the grave. The ghosts of the pompous past so long gone by were Ranko's friends; phantoms of joy and revel and pride, fit companions for the being to whom fate had given no present. Below the castle, its black mouth gaping mystery above the ominous river, a cavern yawned, where Marko is said to sleep while the Vila watches. Above, the ruin; below, the river; and hanging between them, the hero's bed. Yet, where nature and the past made all things sombre, violent, portentous—flood and ruin, crag and chasm, dwarf and giant champion—bloomed, like an Eden vision, hosts of flowers; the courtyard glowed a garden. These were the treasures of the goblin and misshapen being, loveless, wifeless, childless in old age, who haunted this grim solitude: treasures of beauty,

which he fostered jealously, and seemed beside as monstrous toad by dryad sweet and startled. Beauty, of girl or flower, this warped and rugged hunchback loved; beauty, which no longer glassed *himself* as all things hideous and forbidding did. No one knew where he was born (some thought him hell-born) in the distant past; or fancied he would die, for having lived so long, he seemed to mock mortality. It was the custom of the girls in every village of the country Sokol gave its name to, towering over, to come to Ranko for the prize of fair or fairest, two or three together, blushing rivals. Hearing his name called in some trembling treble voice, he would reconnoitre from his turret cell, eyes aglow in the darkness, some declared, like embers of the Badujak, the Yule-log. Then, should any maiden please him, he would mutely beckon her amongst the flowers; but did he find none beautiful, he vanished. The flowers given had each a well-known value as a prize, but the sweet blush-roses were his highest: these were the magic Flower of Beauty, coveted in vain by every Venus of the valleys. But beyond the terror of the dwarf himself, there was the terror of the midnight river, thundering dragon-like from bowels of the rock, and black by legendary ban. Like a mist on the mountain-top lingered tradition of mighty Vlah Ali, who conquered the castle, the fierce Turk who never feared Sultan or Vizier, to whom Murad's myriads were ants in the grass. The foe of Strahinya, whose fortress he burnt, and whose faithless wife bore off to Kossovo with him, had earlier carried a girl of the valleys to Sokol on the crag. As they rode, her cries ceased, and she struggled no longer: they passed up the serpentine ways in the rock-face overhanging the river. Through the noise of the torrent, he heard a faint voice speak. "Vlah Ali, thou art beautiful." The proud Turk, enchanted, promised her slaves to

bear her long train and wide sleeves, honeyed foods, jewelled bracelets and anklets, a life of delights: she spoke again, yet fainter. "Let me sit free, with my back to the torrent and precipice which appal me. When the path widens, then clasp me again to thy heart with thy strong arm, Vlah Ali." He set her free before him, her back to the precipice and torrent, while the path was narrowed to a coffin's breadth between the cliff and space. A shriek pealed from rock to rock, echo to echo . . . the girl, bending backwards, slipped into the void. The Turk reined up, cursing, her words in his ears, now loud as the torrent which drowned them before—"When the path widens, then clasp me again to thy heart with thy strong arm, Vlah Ali!" Since then the grim river runs black, demanding one victim in each generation, and girls who must pass by the fatal path tremble twice, for the dwarf and the Lom.

It was dawn.

Mara saw summit and cloud flush red, while the moon sank silvery into the rose.

"Bosilika and the rest will already have set off," thought the gipsy, with a hint of scorn in the fine curl of her nostril. Approaching Sokol by the least forbidding path, she passed through a wood fed by a brook and full of flowers.

"Let me weave a garland in Lélío's name," she thought, "and ask for love and beauty."

The birds were singing by nest and mate; the earth was a bridal of blossoms; the stream slipped murmuring by of spring and love, of hope and joy. Mara gathered her flowers while dawn's bright blush stole high to the zenith, and far on the blue horizon Sokol saw glitter the burning edge of the sun. Then she sought for the herbs required by this rite of the Slavic Venus, a rite which the women of her people perform each spring for health and beauty. Then,

having woven the flowers, all scented, and herbs, all sweet, in a garland, the girl slipped off her few coarse garments, and stepped with her wreath into the brook. All was still, yet murmurous with blended song of birds and sigh of tree-tops, while the water purled away like tranquil time, whose hours here were told by bursting bud and dropping petal. Mara whispered the charm, with its final invocation, "Lélio! Lélio!" She stood like the Nymph of the Source, her hands full of flowers, her feet in the ripples; then, murmuring "Maxim!" gave the wreath to the stream, and bathed in the spellbound waters.

The sun was up and peering over the mountain-tops as she reached the castle, glad young day begun. Broken walls and crumbling towers, ruined arches, scattered stones, forbade and challenged her. There was no Fairy Horn at the half-demolished gateway through which she saw the flowers' gorgeous field, or Mara, in her wild mood, would have blown it. Instead, her own clear voice flung back the challenge of the frowning ruin, startling its old echoes.

"Ranko!"

Silence. Some birds flew by in the blue, twitting keenly. She counted their number: fortunate. Besides, they went from left to right.

"Ranko!"

What if the dwarf were dead, at last, with all his hoary years? If he were . . . she would carry off all the blush-roses, that none should have one but she.

"Ranko!"

She saw his eyes in the dusk of the narrow turret window. Her wild spirit fired; she tossed him a kiss.

"I have come for the blush-rose, Ranko!"

He did not stir. Was it maiden or mænad?—a vila demanding the prize? Beautiful? As the dawn—no, the fiery sunset, crimson, amber, and gold. At last he beckoned slowly thrice, and disappeared

from the window. Mara bounded to the ruined gates, and stood, spellbound, within the garden. A wilderness of colour, perfume, beauty, poetry, gemmed the castle's sombre setting. The heart of the gipsy dilated ; in all the scattered village there were not so many flowers.

"It must be Paradise!" she murmured. Ranko halted from the tower, and paused before he reached her. Crooked and humped as if his years were bound upon his back and bent him double ; cadaverously pale, like one whose blood is watery with age ; his eyes burned steadily beneath his penthouse brows as if his life had centred there in points of fire. Mara met their weird gaze full, and wondered, with a shudder, if twin meteors rushing down the midnight sky could gleam so pale and piercing.

"Thou hast come for the blush-rose?" asked the dwarf's keen voice.

"For the blush-rose, if you think me worthy, Ranko."

Before the frigid scrutiny which counted women as the flowers, and had never struck love's lightnings from their eyes, Mara herself grew bashful. She fingered a tress of her long black hair, and her eyes, as she blushed, sought the ground.

"Thou art maiden, not vila, then," Ranko said. "I almost thought thee the Plague, white-garmented, come to count my days."

"I am come for the rose, Ranko, only the rose," said Mara pleadingly. "I am a girl and no vila, no plague-spectre ; only give me the rose!"

"Where have I seen thee before?" asked the hunchback, staring her through with his flinty eyes, while a huge raven stepped from the tower, and came towards them with hoarse croak and stately paces.

"You gave the rose to my mother," said Mara, "but she is long since dead."

"Dead! Yes, all dead but I!" cried the dwarf, grinning horribly with irony. "They fall like leaves, and are as soon forgotten." The raven, mysteriously croaking, reached his side, and crooked his neck to glance up at his master. His plumes were rusty with old age, as if attempting to grow grey in their antiquity. "Thou and I," said the hunchback, grimly bantering, "thou and I!—And what if I should *not* give thee the rose?"

Mara stood, her head bent, and a single tear rolled heavy down her cheek.

"Why, thou art the rose thyself, and bathed in morning's sparkling dew—not night's, not night's. . . . Look at her, thou who hast judged them all, the vain, the simple, the good, the bad, the doves, the cursed cuckoos. Dost thou like her?"

He pointed a finger lean and steady as old Death's towards the girl, while he muttered to the raven. The ancient bird fixed keen and twinkling eyes, then gave a croak, spread his funereal wings, and flew to Mara's shoulder.

"Thou hast more wisdom than the sons of men," said Ranko, with a hideous chuckle. "Thou too hast lived to the age of seven eagles, and canst tell ripe corn from chaff."

Mara, unterrified, welcomed the raven with a thrill of gratitude; even as she did the guardian mastiffs' rude affection, when, strong-tongued, they licked her hand. She remembered a morsel of black bread, saved from her supper for the journey, in her pouch, and drew it out to crumble part for him. The dwarf looked on. A butterfly, born amongst their beauty, wanted on with the flowers.

"And now thou wouldst reward her?" muttered Ranko, when the black familiar ceased striking at the coarse crumbs in her palm with his sharp beak. "Come, girl: we will seek thy flower." The raven

paced consciously before them, with proud flutters of his drooping wings. "He knows what flower is fated thine: not spicy pink, nor splendid tulip, nor the fair forget-me-not, nor moon-flower hanging argent in its night of leaves, nor pompous peony; not soulless dahlia unperfumed, nor the sweet narcissus, nor the velvet-petalled heartsease, nor the subtle orchis, nor the starry jasmine, nor the scarlet trumpets of the blood-steeped Judas-flower; not violet, nor valley-bells, nor iris, nor the tall white saintly lily, but the blush-rose, queen of beauty and the garden!" Mara was trembling. The dwarf drew down against his hideous mask a blossom, as if loath to part it from the tree, with loving touches; broke it off at last, and stretched it to her. "Take it. Flowers fade, and so do hope and love, and youth and beauty. Take them also, while thou canst."

Mara fled, with the coveted rose in her breast, and the wizard words in her ears.

"It is Lélío's answer!" she thought, as she passed the brook where she had wreathed the garland.

The hunchback watched her away, with the ghost of youth's remembrance in his eyes. The raven paced towards the tower. Ranko halted in again, alone.

Half-way back, a sound of treble voices warned the hated gipsy that the rest were near. Bosilika, first, broke through the woodland shade, her bright hair wild, a slant of sunshine. The other two were those who scoffed the loudest by the well, at the thought of Mara seen in the procession.

"Mara!"

"The Gipsy!"

"She here!"

They stood aghast, one pointing wonder at her mixed with scorn.

"I went to get the Rose of Beauty," answered Mara, smelling it. "I hope your flowers may be as sweet!"



CHAPTER XIII

DIPLOMACY

"Ma così come la copia delle cose genera fastidio, così l'esser le desiderate negare moltiplica l'appetito."

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO.

THERE are hours when a woman is beset with past memories, present anxieties and future fears; when walls become a prison, and change of scene a need. Ilona, after a feverish night, rose to watch the dawn break from the gardens of the castle. Königslust had been restored and renamed, by the late king, in the manner of the ruins on the Rhine, for he clung with unpopular doggedness to German names and ways. It stood like the Rhine-castles, high and haughty, frowning over the water, the beautiful Königsee blue at its base, and climbing hills behind it. At its flank was a garden, stately with trees and terraces and sweet with bowers, whose balustrade of marble followed the crest of the sudden perilous slope. Ilona leaned on the polished stone while dawn flushed up and fired the waters; the mountains looming purple and grand round this mirror which glassed the sun. The birds in the garden were waking—the birds which Fredegonde used to feed—thrushes, finches, mellow-throated blackbirds, while the lark was already aloft in floods of song. Over the waters the shrill swifts were darting and wheeling, black against the opal east; perfumes rose rich from awakening flowers, and dewdrops

changed to fairy diamonds. In all the lustre and youth of dawn and spring, one thing was wanting: the rose of dawn upon Ilona's cheek, and the gladness of spring in her eyes. She gazed away to the sunrise, weary and wistful, a flower in her hand already dying: a morning-glory, like hope too frail and exquisite for fulfilment. She was lost in the past: the tragedy which had left her orphan on the brink of womanhood; that scene which had frozen her dumb in her place, while a man stabbed a woman to death in her chair at their sumptuous dining-table. . . . Her lonely days in the wild heart of Hungary, left in the haunted castle; her father assassin and suicide, her stepmother butchered in her beauty's wanton prime. . . . The marriage she made, as a means of escape, in her fierce desire for freedom; and its sequel—her coldness maddening one whose love was fervent and devoted. A second tragedy, not two years beyond the date of the first: her husband found dead in his armoury beside a pistol that he had been cleaning. She never knew whether it was planned or chance: she sometimes thought he meant her not to. Might his love have hesitated, even in death, to wake remorse or make reproach? . . . And now, life had burst into bloom, like the year, yet bloom still half-forbidden: Fredegonde, dead, was still alive and adored for Waldemar.

All these spectres smoked up from the sunrise, under her moody eyes, sucking the glory of sky and water into their nothingness. Reckless girlhood, icy wifehood, why should they taunt her now, to prophesy for the future the fruitless tempests of the past? Heretofore she was loved unloving, and neither knew nor cared the pain she cost; but now she also felt love and hate, the red-hot irons of the gods. Where was the King? Three days had passed since the dawn when she stole from his bedside; Gadatz alone had been



with him since then, and he had not mingled with his court. Gadatz! In a burst of rage she thought of him and Fredegonde: one blind, the other dead, yet both before her in the heart of Waldemar. When would the King return to his household? when should she see him again? Three days! Three dawns and noons and nights which dragged like years away!—She was tearing the filmy blue of the convolvulus slowly to pieces in her stifled rage, when she found him standing there beside her, the sun's low beams striking full on his face.

"Countess, I saw you here as I passed, thinking no one yet risen. I have much to thank you for—"

"Thank me? Ah, King Waldemar, too little!"

Her sweet impetuosity, dashed with unnamed melancholy, moved him.

"I have heard from Theodosi how you sacrificed your rest and pleasures to give me those cares which women only—and angels, perhaps—know how to lavish. I feel it more deeply since . . ." he paused.

"There are things which belong to us by right, King Waldemar," she answered; "King Waldemar" always, with the loving woman's hidden joy in the beloved name. "What are our rest and our pleasures when one whom we long to comfort is ill and sad?"

"Yes," thought Waldemar, recurring to Theodosi's praises, "she almost seems angelic." He must have recognised passion in the swift broad glance she turned on him, had love itself not blinded his own eyes.

"When your life hung in the balance,"—her voice trembled, "what could ease or pleasure be to me?"

The King, deeply moved, raised her hand to his lips.

"I thank you," he answered simply. She felt as if the world would sink away; the blood rushed to her heart; she swayed, half swooning. Waldemar, un-

aware of the storm so near him, in the blindness between soul and sister-soul, released her hand, and, looking up, saw Vassilio retiring. He called him.

"Andrassy!"

"Your Majesty?"

The young man turned and hastened forward.

"Till now I have been in no condition to receive or welcome you," the King said, with that gracious air which sat so winningly upon him, heightened in its charm by a touch of invincible sadness. "But to-day I am expecting to confer with Count Fokshany, and shall return to my usual mode of life. . . ." He paused a moment—to quell remembrance of all the words implied, thought Ilona. Then "Countess, Captain Vassilio Andrassy, my personal aide-de-camp," he said. They bowed, unable to reveal the fact of their previous acquaintance, bound up as it was with the two acutest phases of the royal malady. Vassilio recalled two sights, forever branded on his memory, in the moment of the bow: Ilona wildly staunching the King's wound with her hair, and crying "Save him!" and Ilona kneeling, flung forward, by his bed, while she murmured, "The future—all light, all life, all love! . . ." The King's huge boarhound, Karaman, watched Vassilio from his red deep eye-pits with distrust. A blackbird, alighting on a branch near by, began to sing with all his heart. The King turned.

"The birds!" he cried. "They cannot have been fed since—" He paused abruptly.

"King Waldemar," murmured Ilona, eyes cast down, "I have fed them every day."

"You!" exclaimed Waldemar. . . . "How good you are!" he said. "Now I have twice to thank you."

She heard his grateful tone in ecstasy, and answered, with a long full childlike look, "I love them. I always come early, so perhaps the blackbird has flown down as usual to sing and earn his share. Would you

not care to feed them yourself, King Waldemar, this morning? If Captain Andrassy might order—"

"Yes," said the King. "Will you have their crumbs brought, Andrassy? and return to help us feed them."

Vassilio bowed, with a brilliant smile, the brighter for vexation, and left them, thinking of Fokshany's words, "Beware of meeting a successful rival in the King."

The Premier was seated at the massive desk of his cabinet in Zarilov, comparing newspapers of different names and dates, from which he made some cuttings. The first one hinted at mysterious reasons for the King's abrupt departure from the capital amidst the excitement of the outbreak on the Turkish frontier, and rumoured the condition of his health to be unsatisfactory, if not critical. The second published an alarmist article alluding to madness in the case of the King's grandfather and mother, and demanding explanations on the actual state of the King's own health in view of recent actions of his noted widely as eccentric. These two were unofficial journals, but both in Fokshany's secret service. The third, an official sheet of prime importance, tersely recapitulated the heads of the foregoing articles, and denied that the King's health, physical or mental, was affected.

"Good," thought Fokshany. "With one of his eccentric views, it is always well to have a means of control or of—suppression. Once the idea in the popular mind it can lie fallow there, or be at any time made signal use of."

A soldier servant announced a courier from Königs-lust, with letters.

"Let him enter," said Fokshany, with a glance at his Ikon, while he murmured, "Speak of the devil . . ." It was Jephtimi, the forester, who bowed to the ground before the Premier, and drew from his em-

broidered vest a letter in the King's own hand. Fokshany turned slightly in his large worn chair, to which time and use had taught all comfort's secrets, and received it. "Let him eat and drink and wait the answer." Jephthi bowed still more lowly and retired.

"... I desire to consult you on the subject of those reforms which I judge most immediately needful, and also regarding improvements in the condition of certain essential institutions."

A single glance rified its meaning from the rest.

"I will start for Königslust to-morrow," thought Fokshany, with impatience, "and see for myself how things are going."

The Premier arrived early, took luncheon in private with the King, and was closeted with him and Gadatz till evening, when they appeared amongst the court. It had been quietly made known, through Theodosi, that no expressions of condolence or of welcome were desired, and the King's reappearance was unmarked by any demonstration of unusual feeling. Ilona was singing, while Vassilio, at the grand piano, accompanied her; tinkling with the dilettante touch of one who regards music as a mere accomplishment. She rose as Waldemar entered, like the rest, interrupting her soaring song; but he joined her at the instrument and asked her to go on.

"I love music," he said absently; she knew his thoughts had flown, on memories of her music, back to Fredegonde.

"I am also its devotee," remarked Fokshany, with a bow. He observed that she spared him a smiling glance while replying to the King. "Perhaps she imagines that her wiles can make me forget policy," thought the Premier. "Women have made ministers forget it before this, but none of them can influence me."

The King, looking weary, had himself conducted

Gadatz to an arm-chair, and returned to the piano, where Ilona again began her song.

"Sweet as the blackbird's song this morning," said Waldemar, sighing, as she ended.

"Or the nightingale's last night," murmured Vasilio, glancing up into her eyes with his faithless amorous smile.

"Useless for the present," thought Fokshany, watching him behind his impassible mask. "She may give your young pride a fall which will teach you more than would several successes. I think she will, plague take her! . . . Youths and colts, how they hate—and need—the bit!"

"Your Majesty must not remain too long," said Gadatz aside. "Your voice betrays how much you are fatigued."

"The King has worked unusually hard, and should no doubt repose himself," added the Premier. Whether the labours done met his approval no one could conjecture by his face.

"One more song, Countess Ilona," said Waldemar. "I am in the mood for music. Sometimes nothing refreshes me like music's inarticulate poesy." As he spoke, he reminded her strangely of a portrait of Heinrich Heine in a book of his she knew; a noble profile, spiritual, suffering, scornful of the false, weary yet dauntless.

"If I die for it, I must win him," she thought, and poured her passionate soul into the song. . . . A murmur ran through the court as she finished; a circle had formed round the instrument, at a distance from the royal group. All were roused and astonished.

"Such sentiment and tenderness!" the General exclaimed, standing stiffly, with his decorations well displayed, as usual. "And what is more engaging in beautiful Woman than sentiment and tenderness?" After a flattering glance at his companion, "That

reminds me of a strange thing which happened to me while in command at the siege of Jadar—" he said, and went off on his favourite hobby-horse of personal reminiscence. The Baroness interrupted him heartlessly, very stout and smiling.

"There must be someone she wants to bewitch with that siren voice of hers. (That's her way, though you don't believe it, and a dangerous way it is for those who are unwary.) Who knows but it may be yourself, General!" He bowed, hand on heart, while she waddled off laughing.

The dark girl quietly left her unnoticed corner, and retired : she saw her fickle lover amongst the foremost to congratulate the singer. Arseni himself was wondering what witchery beguiled his hatred till it turned to fiercer love ; and frankly wishing dead himself and Ilona, Vassilio, and especially the King.

Fokshany feigned the suavest satisfaction, while keenly watching the dreamy eyes of Waldemar, and wishing Ilona, her voice and arts, in the claws of the devil, Szargol. Gadatz sighed deeply in his darkness, as he heard the King's voice murmur, "Perfect!" "Yet I have not dared to warn him," he thought doubtfully, "for fear it should insensibly arouse and fix his interest."

Ilona went to a sleepless bed, in a tremor of hope and joy. Waldemar, music's exaltation in his soul, knelt long beside Fredegonde's empty couch, and vowed again to work out his release.

Next morning a riding-party was formed, as Fokshany and the King were still engaged in private. Ilona, radiant, wore a white habit and richly worked cap with an aigrette of osprey-plumes, riding the Arab on which she had burst on Vassilio's vision first. The rest wore variations of the picturesque national riding-dress ; and started, the sun shining bright on silk sashes,

embroidered jackets and damascened arms. Arseni asked to be Ilona's escort, as if he were asking a dance; but she shook her head, smiling, and answered that she was promised to Andrassy. Vassilio, riding up at the moment, heard her, and bowed to his saddle-bow. She smiled again, all the coquetry rife in her armed and alive for fresh triumphs.

"But where are the hounds and the huntsmen?" Vassilio laughed, as they all set off.

"We hunt neither stag nor boar," answered Ilona. "One of the King's caprices."

"What!" cried Andrassy. "The King no hunter, in spite of his German blood!"

"The King, by his German blood, is a dreamer, lover, poet, visionary even,—yes, for I have heard him call war 'a proof of Christianity's practical impotence, and of the barbarism of civilisation,'—and, lover-like, he obeys the woman adored. You owe it to Fredegonde, Captain Andrassy, that we ride, not hunt, at the castle."

There was the subtlest rising tone of resentment on her rival's name; but Vassilio did not catch it—had he done so, he already knew too much to learn anything from it. They were riding through turfy valleys which lay between rising peaks and cones; their horses ahead of the others, whose hoofs' faint thud was the sport of the echoes.

"Captain, are you related to the Hungarian Andrassys?" asked Ilona, looking at him with an expression of attention rather than curiosity.

"I cannot tell you," he answered abruptly—a trifle too abruptly, as he felt a second later, for a clever diplomat. "Count Fokshany is my guardian, but he has never chosen to tell me more than that both my father and mother are dead, and have left me a sufficient fortune." His tone was slightly haughty, as of one who repels, but need not fear, inquiry.

Ilona raised her brows and rode on, with a new impression upon her : that, since seeing him beside Fokshany, she had noticed a resemblance between them. Bah! What idle conjectures! What did it signify to her? She was damped a little, a trifle bored, and wished that he had been the King. Coquetry loses half its charm if your partner is not the right one. . . . A long green stretch spread before them: she flicked her horse, and cried "A race!"

"Ready!" exclaimed Vassilio, laughing, glad of a diversion.

Off she went, light as the wind, on her Arab; he in close pursuit: he remembered how he had chased her madly, longing to look on her half-glimpsed face, in a valley green as this, with the mountain air in his eager nostrils. A sense of anger and disappointment chafed him, as he rode hard in pursuit, with a sullen look on his handsome face for once, while his horse felt the spur. It was no comedy, now, to play out for praise at Fokshany's orders; no summer sport for diversion, as he had thought it would be when he came. Now it was love which pricked and spurred him as he pricked and spurred his horse; love which lured her away from him faster than she was flying now. The pace was increasing; they neared the valley's end, swept beyond it, entered another; pressed forward as if death were hard on their track, and life's jack-o'-lantern their pilot. If he could pass her, he thought, it should be an omen that he would win her: his hot blood boiled, his eyes flashed keen as a falcon's on its prey. A length ahead, yet Szargol's self were easier to catch or distance: when should he glimpse her profile? How light she rose to the Arab's stride! . . . Unawares, the pace grew tremendous, though she seemed to ride for sport; the horses foamed and strained and galloped until their speed was frantic. Suddenly Ilona's swerved, kept on a stride or two,

then stopped: Vassilio thundered up like a whirlwind, to find a tall peasant-girl standing before them. . . . Ilona burst into peal on peal of sweet provoking laughter.

"But for this girl I should never have stopped, but have let you chase me forever. I know how you wanted to pass me—boje mili, and you pressed the Arab!—but I would never have given up, rather ridden beyond the sunset! And now," the triumph of mocking coquetry changed to pouting terror, "we have lost our way, and who knows what giant or vila may haunt these mountains?"

Vassilio laughed, determined not to let her divine his anger; a dull discouragement, lead on his heart, at the omen, not the mere prick of vexation. He turned to Mara, whose return from Sokol the Falcon they had interrupted, and, flinging a piece of silver into her bosom, asked her the way.

"What castle, Gospodar?" asked the girl: she was carefully shielding her rose from the sun with her long white veil-like head-dress.

"The King's castle, Königslust; it stands above the lake."

Mara paused, thoughtful.

"The Gospodar means Lasnitza, once the dwelling of Iconia."

"Iconia! Who was she?" cried Ilona. "Tell me, girl! A story!" She clapped her hands like a child, and glanced, all animation, at Vassilio. Mara looked gravely on, recalling a piesma Guamar had chanted, and then related its story with no trace of bashful fear.

"The evil Pacha, the powerful Bull of Rudnik, wrote to Iconia's father, Miloutim, that on his way through the pachalik he should rest at Lasnitza of the Lake. There he commanded, on pain of death, that thirty rooms be prepared for himself and his

friends, and thirty fair Alberian girls to serve them within. For his own apartment, Iconia, Miloutim's daughter, must be reserved. Iconia bade her father fear nothing, and said, 'I will find my thirty companions, and myself will be in the White Tower.' The Pacha came, and was met by a train of beautiful girls; at their head famed Iconia, dressed in a delicate gold-worked vest, three gold-wrought tunics over her shoulders, three rows of pearls on her gleaming neck, and a splendid headdress to crown her. The gates of the White Tower stand open; the Pacha and his friends, enchanted, retire with each one his favourite, leaving their guards outside. But a shot rings loud: the signal! Before its echo replies, they are all dead men. Gronitza the Haiduk impersonated his foster-sister Iconia; the others were valiant Alberian lads, who swore to destroy the hated Turks, and save their sisters."

Her hearer was spellbound, then cried, "The White Tower! Delicious! My rooms are there! It must be the castle: I long to see it again. Tell us, quick, how to reach it!"

"First," murmured Mara, a blush mounting warmly, "dare I ask about the King?"

"The King!" exclaimed Ilona, catching her breath. "What do *you* know of the King?"

"Nothing, most worthy and beautiful. Is he a tyrant? an usurper? . . ."

"What!" cried Ilona, glancing astounded at Andrassy. "Are you mad?"

"I long to know whether he is good and great, as a true king ought to be. Tell me, O beautiful! Lighten my darkness, for only Sima answers me, at home, and he knows nothing."

"The King is good and great," said Ilona proudly, "gracious and merciful. He has never been asked for help or boon but he gave them from his heart.



You must be mad, girl, or thinking of some grim old story of the Turk, when you dare to speak of tyrant or usurper—and of him!”

Vassilio winced. What a royal air! what scorn and pride and triumph! When could *he* inspire her with a love to breed such fire? . . . Mara bowed her head, as if she felt that the rebuke was just.

“They are tyrants themselves,” she muttered. “No doubt they have lied about him too. . . . I will tell you your road to the castle,” she said, looking up, and directed them. They were riding off, when she ran behind them, calling “Gospodar!”

“What is it, then?” cried Vassilio, turning, irritable and nervous.

“Your silver!” she said. “I have wished for no payment. Gospodar, take it back.”

That evening Fokshany was gone, but had left a disturbing suggestion behind him. He had bluntly, with every apology first, warned the King of Ilona. What Gadatz had avoided, the statesman ventured, convinced that at no time could this idea so revolt the King as at present, or do such mischief to the Countess. Waldemar was very grave throughout the hour he passed amongst his court, and Ilona, divining in him some jarred nerve, was quietest of all the ladies. As the King was rising to leave the room, Vassilio murmured:

“And to-morrow? Are you never going to feed the birds again?”

She said, low, “As His Majesty pleases.”

Waldemar heard.

“As the Countess herself desires,” he answered gravely. “To-morrow, then, at sunrise.” He was remembering, with generous abhorrence of distrust and intrigue, the cares his sick-bed owed her; and was insensibly impressed by her air, as she spoke, of

graceful modesty. With native chivalry, and that ideal of woman in his thoughts which love of Fredegonde had taught him to revere, he decisively repulsed the charge against her, while she stood with childlike eyes upon his face. "Good-night, Countess Ilona," he said, thinking wearily, "Lawyers and statesmen are trained to deceit and distrust. . . . Fokshany's state suspicions have misled him."

CHAPTER XIV

THE FEAST OF THE KRALIZE

“Ich schlinge
Den Arm um dich, auf meinen Armen trag’ ich
Durch eine teufelvolle Hölle dich!”

FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER.

THE three girls were coming down the way towards the village, flowerless and angry, when Guamar’s voice was heard, singing gladly the song of the Demon’s wooing of the Vila, Radischa’s wooing, later to be sung in the procession.

“Guamar!” cried Bosilika, imperious and shrill; she wanted a confidant to her vexation, who would not twit her with it as these hateful girls had done. “Guamar!” The song ceased. “Guamar!”

A crack of breaking boughs, and rustle of young leaves swept sudden back, and he had left the secret way between the trees, known to Haiduks like himself, for the path, and stood before them.

“Thou, Bosilika!” he cried, overjoyed. “I was thinking of thee as I sang, and thy voice so near seemed the echo of my thoughts!”

“Guamar, Mara has won the rose,” said Bosilika, looking past him straight ahead of her, and biting at a tress of her bright hair.

“What rose?” asked Guamar, hardly knowing what was said, his poet-eyes fixed ardent on the face so often dreamed of. Bosilika turned a look of indignation on him.

"*What* rose! . . . Ranko's! That execrable dwarf's! That hideous toad's who has lived a thousand years, and spits poison in Sokol the Falcon!"

"The Rose of Beauty—" exclaimed Guamar, thunderstruck. "To Mara! Hadst *thou* been there, Bosa?"

The coquette was softened.

"No, Guamar. I came after, and he gave me the next highest—the carnation."

The others burst in :

"But she threw it in the dwarf's own face, and flew out of the garden in a fury. That evil spirit of his, that familiar in the form of a great black demoniac bird, flew after, and we who were waiting outside, not yet called, had to run for our very soul's safety. He croaked out horrible threats and spells, and would have pounced on us all and killed us, if we had not darted into a wood where the True God made him lose us!"

"It was all because of Bosilika's vanity, hating the second prize," cried the others. "And that lost us ours, on account of that demon which sallied out to chase us!"

"But the dwarf is mad!" cried Guamar, "mad! Why, she is black as midnight, while thou art bright as day! Age must have turned him blind and drivelling before he could prefer that gipsy-girl to thee."

Bosilika smiled.

"Dost thou think that, Guamar?" she murmured, with bewitching bashfulness.

"Who would not think it?" cried Veliko's son, with all his father's fire, and every lover's sweet delusion that his own love's face is fairest. They came to a branch in the path which led to the farther end of the valley, and Bosilika's two companions took it, crying, "Sbogon! God be with you! We must

go and put our feast-dresses on, or we shall be late for the procession.

"Bosa, tell me, will Stroimir be here? Will Miloutim be here to-day?"

She laughed. She began to forget the rose in playing with the heart her beauty's snare had caught instead.

"Is he coming?" repeated Guamar passionately. "Tell me, Bosilika! Tell me!"

"I hope so," she answered demurely, trifling with the corner of her scarlet gold-barred apron.

The Haiduk caught a deep breath which seemed to wrench his vitals.

"Dost thou mean it?"

"What?" she asked innocently, arched brows lifting, smiling in his eyes.

"That Miloutim is welcome to thee . . . dear—to thee," said Guamar, strangling with the words.

Bosilika dropped her eyes and blushed, and fingered the bright beads upon her neck. He had grown pale under the manly bronze which half-disguised his face's pure-lined youth. He waited, watching her with burning eyes, some drops of sweat fresh started on his forehead, his teeth set hard, his nostrils wide, his muscles tense. Bosilika said nothing.

"Tell me!" he commanded fiercely. "Dost thou love him? Yes, or no!"

"Guamar—you frighten me! Oh, boje mili, he will kill me!" whimpered the beauty. She stood still, childishly crying till her face was like a blush-rose bathed in dew. The Haiduk softened, shamed and touched and fired by the sight of her in tears.

"What have I done? Brute beast that I am, forgive me, Bosa, forgive me! A rough word to thee, whom I'd lay down my life for . . . Fear and hope have sent me mad! Sweet, sweetest, dry those tears—let me kiss them away!—smile again: thou art the

sun that lights my world! Think: I have dreamed of thee as winter dreams of spring. Think: my love and thine idea have grown like leaf and flower!" He slipped a strong arm about her shoulders, and drew her bright head down upon his breast. She was still crying softly, remembering the coveted lost rose, and Mara's triumph. "Bosa," he whispered, "think how I have loved thee . . . and how I hate the other! Now we are alone, speak the truth, dear: say if thou lovest him—speak, in the name of the True God!"

Bosilika lay on his heart like a dove too spent for flight: she did not heed the invocation.

"Thou art my life!" he cried. "I cannot let thee go because I am poor, and he will have a kingdom. If thou but lov'st me, tell me that Veliko's son, not Stroimir's, is dearest. Then I'll outdo him at fusil and plough, as I do at love of thee; I'll work and fight as much better than he, as I sing; and I'll win thee, spite of Szargol and old Lazar! . . . What dost thou say, sweet? Lift up thine eyes, and look at me kindly, Bosa! Think of my months in the forest, far from thee, dreaming only of thee! When I sing of Iconia, 'tis thou; or of white-handed Militza after the battle; or the Maiden of Kossovo seeking her true-love far on the bloody field. When I wake in the heart of the forest at midnight, the moon in the tree-tops still and cold, it is thy face, not hers, that shines silvery down and draws me to heaven in dreams. Remember, Bosilika, fate has already sealed me unhappy in death. . . . As a child, I escaped from the vili, who claimed me, found alone in the forest; retaining their curse, the gift of song, and the certainty of a tragic fate. . . . Let my life be happy, at least, then, thou who art all in all to me! dawn of my day, star of my night, sweet one rose of my summer!"

As he spoke of the vili, mysterious beings, daughters

of rivers and forests, the Haiduk glanced round with lowered voice, then whispered the rest in her ear. Bosilika's ear was seductive, pink and fine as a rose-leaf: he kissed its tip which peeped from her hair, that web of witchery. . . . The spell was broken: she sprang from his arms.

"Oh, Guamar! I shall be late for the procession, and I am Queen Kralize! Let us run: it is long past two by the sun, and I must put my fine new dress and veil on!"

"Quick!" laughed Guamar, his dark eyes sparkling—jealousy forgotten in new bounding hope, while he met her look, reproachful yet dependent. They joined hands like two truant children, and ran wind-swift down the woodland path.

The whole wide-scattered village was in holiday, and every girl and youth had on their best. Work was put by; the housewife gossiped, though she ever plied her useful distaff; the husbandman rested; the mill-wheel turned forgotten, busy-idle; friends drank together; the mastiffs at the house-doors yawned and lay contented in the sun; the oxen felt no yoke nor goad the livelong day, and gazed abroad with calm thanksgiving; the pigeons circled swooping, free and white against the blue, to the music of their wings' long flutter; only the indefatigable hens, ducks, geese, and turkeys laid their usual eggs with customary self-congratulations; and the sly-eyed pigs pursued their favourite business of rooting and swilling without pause. The valley, even, was festal in its fair green springtime garb, the trees in leaf and the plants in flower; while the bloom of orchards and the song of nesting birds seemed the voice and footsteps of the spring.

And now the procession began winding through the village, whose isolated dwellings scattered all the valley's length; dwellings whose chambers, built

around the central room, extended with the family till one house formed a street. Each homestead ostensibly belonged to the father and mother of the family, whose patriarchal sway was the pillar of the peasants' simple social system; and all worked and ate and rested together in the general room with its lime-bark-lined loam walls, and its fire in the centre. On the patriarch's death, his sons choose one amongst themselves for Stargeshina, Master of the House; and still remain united till too great an increase of the family makes separation needful. . . . The procession paused before the Papst's house, where Sima and his childless fat Popadia lived; and a faint strain of music floated down the valley, Bosilika's clear young voice singing one of the songs of the Kralize, with its refrain of "Lélio!" and burden of spring and love. Stroimir had come with Miloutim down from their summer haunt in the mountains; he was waiting for the end of the procession, when the drinking and the kolo-dancing should begin, to have a final secret consultation with Jovan and old Lazar, on the subject of the Haiduk plot. Jovan himself arrived from his kloster in the yet remoter hills: one of those founded by the ancient kings in mysterious heights and forests, where, itself defended from the onslaughts of the Turk, religion preserved nationality. In these venerated monasteries buried in the bosom of the mountains, and patrons, each, of sacred streams, were treasured old Slavonic missals and huge bells cast in the days of Lazar and great Douchan. To these reverend walls entire villages would make their way upon high festivals, especially on Saint George's Day, and stay encamped there three whole days in prayer. From the monks and not the papsts came the Church's learned men; and from their ranks, not the clergy's, rose the Metropolitan. Jovan was already Archimandrite of his kloster, and aimed at

the spiritual sovereignty of Alberia. . . . The procession had arrived at Lazar's house, and Bosilika was dancing with her twelve companions, who formed the train of Queen Kralize. Three other girls, attired as the King, the Maid of Honour, and the Standard-Bearer, sang first the Song of the Vili who dance under the growing fruit tree, then the Song of Radischa, relating how the demon shakes the dew from leaves and flowers, and sues to the beautiful vila whom he loves, with the promise that, sitting in the cool shade by his mother, she shall spin silk on a golden distaff.

Lazar and Jovan came to the door, and behind them stood, in shadow, Stroimir. The Haiduk's giant frame and strength, his sombre brow and firm-shut mouth, his eye, commanding as a king's, contrasted, though half seen, with Miloutim's rude aspect: that of a boor with all the brutal heritage of peasant ancestry in dulness and excess, and lacking the genius of his father. Jovan stood forward in his sweeping robes, a tall black kalpak on his head, whose smooth front brought into relief his broad and ardent brow, a great gold cross on his breast. Beside him, contrasting as strongly with the sombre Haiduk as with the warrior-priest, stood Lazar, lean and tall, fierce-visaged, wolf-eyed, iron-armed. The old man watched his grandchild's grace as she danced, with a keen inexorable smile; the same with which he had ordered one of those soldiers to be shot, in the days of Vlastimir, with whom he was yet so familiar that he would take a pipe from their mouths to smoke. In spite of the feast, he had on his usual dress, a worn-out short pelt, old blue trousers and black cap, which he never varied. In war-time he had formed a salient contrast to the Haiduk Veliko, young Guamar's gallant father; a reckless impetuous fire-hearted chief, where Lazar

was secret, cold, and cautious. The two were known as Veliko, Sword of the Haiduks, and Lazar, their Shield. It was even said that when Veliko was penned in Negotin by the Grand Vizier himself, and sent for reinforcements, Lazar replied, "Let him help himself! *His* praise is sung to him at table by ten singers, *mine* is not: let him hold his ground, the hero!" The Haiduk had driven many thousand head of cattle into his citadel while waiting for the Turks, scouring the country, his robber spirit keen, with his usual reckless courage. He was even seen, on his Arab horse, at the gates of Viddin, in the plain before the fortress—but his dauntless day was nearly done. Vlastimir's reserves were yet undrilled; the Vizier mined closer to the fortress every day, then battered down tower after tower with his cannon, and last the highest, Veliko's own stronghold. The valiant Haiduk went down unmoved, and cheerfully lived in the vault. Ammunition lacked at last: every tin or leaden object, even spoons or lamps, he ordered to be melted into balls; and one day, all other metal exhausted, he kept the enemy at bay with melted coins. He had sent to the Senate, but still no aid. At dawn, as Veliko, going his rounds, had just ordered a damaged redoubt repaired, a Turkish artilleryman, recognising him, aimed his cannon well and fired. With the words "Drshte se!" (Stand firm!) the hero fell, his body torn asunder. Five days later, the garrison fled across the morass, leaving the frontier undefended, but Lazar heard of the Haiduk's death with no token but his cruel smile. . . . Behind the old man now, and peering out at the dancers, was Loubitza, enraged at Mara's prolonged absence, but awed by the men's neighbourhood to quasi-silence. She was secretly noting the grin of approval with which Miloutim watched Bosilika, his brutal mask lit up by eyes which gleamed with

brutal pleasure. Maxim was also watching; the national pride of an Alberian in his sister (who, for her part, swears by her brother's name) too strong for his preoccupation. His arm was flung round Guamar's neck in a familiar attitude: though pobratimi, brothers by choice, they loved each other dearly as if born of the same mother. In fact, their alliance was founded on the death of Guamar's elder brother, as consoler for whose loss the poet always thought of Maxim with deep tenderness. As the brothers' birthdays fell in the same month, a grim old custom decreed that the living should be fastened to the dead till he chose in his stead a stranger youth, who would release him. A man, when choosing his brother in God, for fidelity and aid throughout their lifetime, may best select one of whom he has dreamed that he asked help in time of need, and Guamar thus had dreamed of Maxim. In Veliko's son and Lazar's grandson the chiefs' old feud was ended; deep in the forest they swore the oath at a ruined cloister's altar.

Bosilika's dance was closing. She met Guamar's burning eyes, remembered the rose, and blushed with pleasure, then with consciousness, and then with sheer vexation. So much beloved, and yet not Queen of Beauty! At least the gipsy was not there to flaunt the priceless rose! At the moment Maxim sent another searching glance abroad, and his expression changed. Relief and anxiety divided him. The dance ceased. Mara joined the group.

"And so thou'rt back?" shrieked enraged Loubitzza, forgetting the respect due to the men, and struggling forward. "Thou'rt back, thou baggage, thou hussy, thou jade, thou insolent beggar! back to get thy dinner. Not a bite nor sup shalt thou have, by our holy Elias, till to-morrow after mid-day: thou minx, thou glutton, thou bastard, outcast, daughter of all the devils!"

"What is this?" asked Jovan, as she was pushing past him with fingers crooked and heavy body panting.

"What's that gaud in thy viper's breast?" screamed Loubitza, reaching for it: old Lazar, smiling, had caught her calmly by the garments as she burst the circle, and held fast. "Where hast thou been, thou witch, thou vampire?"

"The dwarf of Sokol the Falcon gave me the Rose of Beauty, Loubitza."

"Here's for thy Rose of Beauty, toad!" screeched Loubitza, reaching for it again with talons crooked like an eagle's, and this time purposely loosed by Lazar. "Here's for thy cursed rose—here!—here!—and now for thy face, thou serpent!"

Lazar let go her straining skirts, and she flew at Mara, nails ready. The old wolf smiled with his keen cold sneer; Jovan stood scandalised; Stroimir watched sombrely; Miloutim laughed aloud. Bosilika shrank beside Guamar, secretly glad that the rose was ruined; Guamar instinctively flung a protecting arm about her, while he looked on, uncertain, in disgust. All the maiden dancers, in their festal garments, bright as butterflies, were background to the hateful scene: Mara, calm and careless, smiling; and Loubitza, bursting with rage, her talons up. With a screech she plunged at the gipsy, only to find Maxim before her, stern as fate.

"Enough abuse! no blows!" he said. "Wilt thou dare to lay thy hands on my betrothed?"

A murmur of surprise broke out amongst the rest, while Loubitza's arms dropped to her sides.

"Thy betrothed!" said Lazar, on a sudden, through his teeth. "Before thou mak'st her wife, I'll kill ye both with my own hand!"



CHAPTER XV

REVENGE

"Souls made of fire, and children of the sun,
With whom revenge is virtue."

EDWARD YOUNG.

THE old wolf was springing at his grandchild, cursing her by every name that ever shame and infamy suggested, when Stroimir's great grasp fell on his shoulders like a vice. The Haiduk spoke, "No blows: she is a woman!"

"Right!" exclaimed Jovan, striding forward. "Peace!" And he held forth the gold cross on his breast. Loubitza tumbled back, abashed but unappeased, still muttering "Bastard! Serpent!" Lazar glared about, lips curling back from long keen teeth as snarling dogs' do. Another voice was heard, with hasty footsteps thumping up.

"What, brothers! daughters! sons! what's this? what's this? Come, silence! Peace! For shame!"

The circle broke. The girls fell back, confused, before the old black robes and toppling kalpak of the Papst, like doves before a swooping kite. Loubitza rushed into the house. Old Lazar, Stroimir's iron hand still firm, foamed with his fury, every vein and muscle starting like a cord. Sima stood panting, confronted with Maxim and Mara, the youth's strong arm flung fast about the girl, and the ruined rose's petals on the ground.

"Speak!" puffed the Papst, and shook his two

reproving fingers. "What devil's doings are ye all about?"

Mara, for the first time, spoke, a fire red as Ætna's in her eyes.

"Father Sima, I have won the Rose of Beauty, and the love of Maxim, therefore Lazar wants to kill me, as he tried to once before."

There was such a menace in her voice and burning glance, that Sima, what with all the rest, was staggered. So Maxim loved her!—then he never could have beaten her, inspired by imps, as Sima feared. The Papst recovered, ceased to pat his stomach, stare, and shuffle, and lifted his fat dirty warning hand.

"Wouldst thou outrage our ikons by choosing a feast-day on which to slaughter thy child? Fie, fie! What, Lazar, dishonour the saints by thy horrid fury? Call straight to the Devil, who"—crossing himself—"is always by? 'Tis clear thou'rt possessed! Look—he foams at the mouth! We must exorcise thee, Lazar!—Here, lad, run quick to the Popadia, and fetch the holy water, brush and book.—O melancholy sight, possessed like this! (Out, out, then, demon, imp, or devil!) Think of the day, the holy day, thou hast defiled, and spew him forth from out thy bosom!"

Sima paused, both hands aloft in earnest exhortation, while the rest gazed fearfully at Lazar for the sign. A little toad hopped quick across the rose-leaves.

"Look, there's one!" roared Miloutim.

"Ay!" shouted Sima, dilating till his squat pot-bellied figure seemed a giant's. "Spew them out, Lazar! Cast them forth! Away with Szargol and his minions!"

"Possessed!" sneered the old wolf, containing himself with a mighty effort, while he fiercely licked his lips, on which the spume of rage had gathered.

"Think'st thou I spew toads at thy bidding, Sima, because thou art the Papst? Hell and blood! I will show you all that I am calm as any of ye!" He stepped back beside Stroimir, hideous as a mask of Satan, bare arms locked across his breast. "*Now* do you see me spitting toads and imps? . . . No, by Elias the thunderer, and Panteleimon of the tempests!"

Sima was taken aback.

"That toad no imp? Thou canst not prove it! Miloutim, here, saw it leap from thy lips, and it vanished in hell-smoke near Mara!—Besides, thou art better—thyself again, Lazar. Let us thank the holy Ikon of our village. Urchin, here! and I will purify the earth which swallowed up the fleeing devil."

The child advanced, agog with fascinating fear, and picked his way in horrid dread of treading on the spirit. As Sima began diligently sprinkling, while he muttered exorcisms, he once more marked the ruined rose.

"Lazar, thank the Saint thou art delivered of thine imp," said the Papst, giving back the brush and water. "(And fly thou, lad, to the Popadia, with these, at once, lest worse befall thee!) Unworthy act, to tear the rose to pieces! Shame! Fie, fie! What roaring dragons are our passions!"

"I never touched her cursed rose," growled Lazar, grim as death.

"Loubitza did it," interrupted Mara. "She thought I would lament the fading prize while I have still what won it." She smiled proudly.

"Loubitza!" cried the Papst. "O rotten hearts and ill-begotten feast-day! Woman, thou art there: come out! Ah, lizard in his chink, or coneys in his burrow, stick not faster. Here, to the door; here, forth amongst us all! A woman, yet no bosom for the lonely girl! A mother, yet no bowels for the

orphan! Oh, think of Mary, Christ's sweet mother! Thy prayers shall fall back curses on thee, winged with hate, not love. 'Peace on earth' is the law of the True God; and how can peace be without love? Love is the gospel of the heart of man; God's ordinance: then, 'Love ye one another!'"

"Amen!" said Jovan, in his loud deep voice. The others bowed their heads. Sima's face, uplifted in his soul's enthusiasm, seemed to catch a heavenly glory.

There was a silence.

"Mara," said the Papst, becoming suddenly once more long-bodied short-legged and material, "go thou from me to the Popadia, and tell her not to cook the bacon till she sees me coming back. Bosilika and all ye maidens, remember your procession, and move onward. Lazar, a word amongst us elders in the house." He led the way within.

"I've had enough of imps and fiends," grinned Miloutim. "I'll follow Queen Kralize." His eye had lit on Guamar, who, singing, with his gusle in his hands, accompanied the girls: he felt a heavy yet malicious jealousy of Veliko's poet-son. Stroimir slowly entered, Jovan next, then Lazar, smiling keenly. Loubitza followed humbly, last of all.

Mara and Maxim retraced the course of the clear strong stream towards the gorge and Sima's dwelling. They had so far walked in silence, side by side, not hand in hand; he glancing at her, she with eyes averted. Behind them, far down the valley, wound the procession of the Kralize. Tall fruit trees, fair with bloom, were showering scented petals, summer snow. The sun was gloriously setting.

"Mara," said Maxim gravely, "Sima shall marry us when he returns."

She started, and turned full upon him.

"Never!"

His strong face set like a mask of stone : he stepped back a pace under the blow.

"Never!" he muttered. "But we love each other. . . . I would die for thee!"

"Why? I am nothing to thee—neither bride nor sister—I, the alien, the outcast!"

"What are thy thoughts?" he asked, watching her fierce gaze, steady as an eagle's, on the sunset.

"Thoughts not of love, but of hate," she answered.

"Hate and dear revenge! . . . Am I a clod, to be kicked by every heel? a beast, to be struck by every fist? a fool, to stay with a tribe that curse me, like a swallow amongst kites? . . . Make me thy wife! What, and thyself a scoff—the youth that wedded Lazar's gipsy bastard? A life like hell, where this is purgatory: never, never, never! A wife unhonoured, a mother scorned, my children shrieked at by the others they would play with, my house a kite's nest, scouted in the valley, and myself—the gipsy bastard still! Think of Lazar, Loubitza, Bosilika, Maxim, and let me go. Leave me; go back to thy race, whom I loathe, who disown me, and marry a girl of their choice—some vain pigeon-peer of thy sister's! . . . Yes, thou lovest me now; I believe thee—but afterwards? What then?"

They stood face to face—she wild and wilder as thought succeeded thought; he growing fierce at resistance founded on truths he knew and hated.

"I will protect thee with my life!" he said. "Canst thou never trust me, Mara?"

"Yes; but for me with thy people it is battle to the death. And then, the beloved is a flower, first cherished in the pride of bloom and perfume, but soon, in the hot hand, faded—and the flower is flung away."

"Cruel, to one who has loved thee so long and fondly!" cried Maxim, lashed to an outburst. "Thou speakest to try me—tell me so, Mara!"

"No; I speak from my heart and my sorrow."

Maxim was lost in a surprise now half despair. He fixed his eyes on her as if to read her through, and yet as if her own gaze dazzled him.

"Mara, think of thy words by the falls, when thou wert so cruel, yet so loving! Thou saidst I was dear to thee. . . . Say it again, here, heart to heart, or tell me thou wast lying!"

He caught her to him in a fierce embrace she had not strength to burst from.

"How can I love thee," she wildly cried, "when thy people torture me like fiends of hell?" She felt the need of harsher words and ways, since the voice of his rebellion roused allies in her own heart. "I do not love thee!"

He let her go, stood back, and looked at her with that broad gaze she knew so well. "Thou dost not love me?" he repeated slowly. Then, with a spasm of agony in heart and voice, "But who will love thee more than I do?"

"Love is a chain," said Mara, resolutely shutting traitor gates of sight and hearing. "Love is a chain, and I have borne chains long enough—too long!—a slave to those I hated. Now I am going to break them all, and seek for a friend, a home—and my revenge!"

"Wouldst thou leave the valley, and alone?" asked Maxim, turning pale and sick. "Where wilt thou seek for a friend and a home? Thou'rt mad! There are wolves in the mountains, robbers—I will not let thee go!"

"Art thou my master, Maxim Brankovich?"

"Yes," thundered Maxim, "I am!"

They stood confronted—the jet-haired gipsy defiant, round arms crossed on rounder breast; and he, hands clenched, with desperation in his eyes, determined to coerce her.

"When I go out in the wide strange world, I have

no more to fear or hope. If wolves kill me, as they did those women of the village Alexinaz last winter, when hunger and cold drove them down from the forests, what matter? No one but you will mourn. Robbers would let me pass: I have nothing but poor old Sima's holy token round my neck—if not, this knife, for them or me. . . . Farewell, perhaps for ever, Maxim. When thou wouldst find me, follow this stream: it flows to the lake Lasnitza."

She was turning away, when he seized her hand in a grasp that forced a cry.

"Thou shalt not go! I will keep thee, though I have to bind thee down with thine own hair! Speak! whom dost thou seek at Lasnitza? Speak! what friend hast thou there?"

She looked him long in the eyes, and read his passion, jealousy, and fear. "Shall I tell thee?" she said, with a daring smile. "The King of Alberia!"

His hands went up as if to ward a blow off.

"The Usurper's son!" he said.

"Usurper! What dost thou know of usurpers, here in the quiet valley? Thou knowest just what those say who hated the father and never saw the son. By Saint Jovan! I have been loathed for my father enough to know what that means to the banned one; enough to believe that just because you call him devil, God must have made him a saint. I have lived all my life amid hate and injustice, longing to be known and loved. Now I will seek him of whom it is said he is gracious and merciful!"

"The tyrant! The son of Vlastimir's assassin!" exclaimed Maxim, with a frantic gesture.

"It is said that he is 'great and good,'" smiled Mara, excited till her lover's anguish seemed a sweet foretaste of sweet revenge. "It is said of him, Maxim, that 'he has never been asked for grace or boon but he gave them from his heart!'"

"Where hast thou heard this? Whom hast thou talked with?"

"One of Sima's foul fiends, perhaps: thou knowest how evil I am counted."

"By Szargol and all his devils, Mara, I swear thou shalt not go! I will sooner hale thee to Lazar's feet, and denounce thee as a traitor to the Haiduks!"

Her eyes flamed, then quenched their sudden fire in terror's semblance. "No, Maxim!" she cried; "not that! I will stay. . . ." she seemed about to fall. He caught her in his arms.

"I never meant to threaten thee! Forgive me—I was mad. . . . I love thee too wildly, and fear for thee too much—alone in the mountains, in the dark forests, dying of hunger, perhaps!" He pressed her head to his breast with strong protecting hands, and kissed her passionately, like some worshipped being, lost and then refound. "Thou wilt stay, then? not hate me because of the others? not leave me to think of thee lost, in danger, helpless, starving, dying? Thou knowest not how I have loved thee . . . or thou couldst not hurt me so!"

"I will stay," she murmured submissively. "Let us hurry on to Father Sima's."

It was midnight. A cock crowed.

"An evil omen," said Jovan to Stroimir and Lazar. They were sitting over the embers, all the village but themselves asleep.

"Well for that false jade that Sima has housed her to-night, or the omen's ill should be for her!" muttered Lazar, remembering his troubles. "Thou thinkest it best the attempt should be made at Lasnitza, then, Jovan, not Zarilov?"

"Yes," said the Archimandrite. "Here we have a handful of men to deal with, but there a cityful. Yet, even there the name of Vlastimir would be a

call to arms. Leonti tells me they are disaffected, sick of foreign rule and manners ; and that much has been done in secret by the priesthood to prepare the way for Stroimir. The question is that Fokshany must unfailingly perish with the King. For that, a sure hand and a surer heart are wanted ; for one dead and the other living means success with failure at its heels."

"The news will fly through the country, and the clamour will be raised by all our friends: we have worked so stealthily, since Stroimir's return, that no suspicion has been roused," said Lazar, gloating. "Who would think that a herdsman like him, and a husbandman like me, and a monk like you, could plan it?—ay, and execute it too! We remember our fighting days, eh, Jovan? We remember our valiant men, not one of whom feared to seize with his naked hand the edge of a brandished sword!" The old wolf grinned, and clenched his shrunken knotted bony fist. "My seven sons fell fighting with the Turks for the Dragon of Alberia, as old Youg Bogdan's nine did round Czar Lazar's standard on Kossovo. War is the richest pastime!—but it leaves the house too empty, and too many fields untilled."

"There will not be a blow struck this time, I believe," said Jovan, meditating. "Enough that Stroimir be ready in the city; our allies will do the rest."

"May the True God bless the Czar!" exclaimed Stroimir solemnly, "who aids me to regain my rights, and to avenge my murdered father!"

"It is late," said Jovan, "and I must depart early. Let us recapitulate our plan. Nothing must be written, but I wish to have it clear to tell the Russian agent who is with us at the Kloster as a pilgrim to the holy well. Therefore, no mistakes: time, place,

and people certain. First— Was that a footstep that I heard?"

Lazar looked up with a leer.

"Thou art taking after Sima's old-wife's ways: that midnight cock-crow shook thee to the marrow! Dost thou think that the Serpent of Eden himself could crawl to the door before my mastiffs would have pinned him?"

Jovan, who was the brain of the conspiracy, as Lazar was its arm, and Stroimir its heart, recovered himself, and began to detail its particulars upon his fingers. The others, elbows on their knees, bent forward earnestly to listen. The loud deep voice of the warlike Archimandrite was subdued, but still broke clear, though low, upon the utter hush of night.

Without, the mountains were silver with moonlight; the stream's swift waters slipped silver away; the silver moon queened heaven amidst her court of silver stars. A world all purity, all peace; a white world, bleached of blood and shame; a world so fair it seemed to wait for some archangel, tall and radiant, winged with light, to path its valleys. But there—a something dark! two dogs asleep. And there—upon the ground before the door of Lazar's house . . . a girl stretched snake-like at her length, and listening. At every word of Jovan's, Mara's heart beat more exultant to one tune:

"Revenge! Revenge!"

An hour after midnight, and the little Papst woke up, a weight upon his breast.

"God give it be not the Black Dog!" he thought, trembling: he forgot the Popadia's bacon. Then the events of the day returned to his mind with disagreeable vividness. "A wayward and truculent race, in spite of all my pains and preaching," muttered Sima,

turning over. "Would that the Saint might let me sleep again!" (The Saint was the ancient household Ikon.) Five minutes passed, through which he snored uneasily, alarmed by dreadful dreams. At last, with a snort, he woke much startled, sure that he had caught a vampire. "Seized in the fact!" roared the agonised Papst. "And now I shall become one too! Help! I'm bloody—I'm sucked—I'm dying! Hellish wretch, let go! A light!"

Sima woke thoroughly up, with the fat Popadia boxing his ears in the dark.

"Thou hast had too much bacon!" she cried. "I will teach thee to take me for a vampire!"

The Papst was much subdued, and lay unable to drop off again. He thought of Mara and her ruined Rose of Beauty, of Maxim's warnings to himself. He had left her lying by the embers in the central room, and hoped the noise of his own roaring and the Popadia's indignant shrieks had not disturbed her—nay, put her terrified to flight. He remembered that this was what Maxim most feared—her leaving the village and the valley. What if she had heard the noise, and thought it was a legion of foul fiends, ghouls, witches, imps, and spectres? Perhaps she had heard him shouting "Vampire!" out so loud, and had fled the hideous neighbourhood. The Papst began to kick and puff, and wished he dared get out of bed to see if she were there, at least: his guest, whose safety was his obligation . . . He ventured a fat hairy foot, but drew it in again. Pitch dark—and then one never knows what one might stumble on.

The Popadia was asleep again, and snoring placidly.

"I'd like to wake her," thought Sima. "It would make me braver to know she was awake . . . but she might believe it was the bacon, and contrive to cuff my ears again before I could get fairly out of bed. Fie, fie, Sima, thou art a coward! Man thyself:

remember thou'rt the master!" He fidgeted another long five minutes, then "Militza!" he shouted loudly.

The Popadia grunted, turned on her side with a mutter, and was fast asleep again.

"Militza!"

"What devil hast thou clawed a-hold of now?" cried the Popadia, waked up indignant.

"Get out of bed," ordered Sima sternly, "and see if Mara is not gone."

"Out of bed!" the exasperated creature cried. "Thou'rt mad as the moon to-night!"

"Get out of bed and do my will, or I shall have to beat thee," answered Sima.

The Popadia moved, sat up, and dived into the darkness with a flood of rebel comments. Sima drew snuggler the sheepskin and hugged himself on his success.

"Thou art mad, or else 'tis the bacon: yes, for thou gorgest it so. I'll never cook thee any more, though it is thy favourite victuals. 'Tis that vile bacon; I said so when thou laidest hold of me to slay me for a vampire. Ah! Now I've broken my head against the wall—thou lazy cowardly devil-fearing beast, to send me instead of coming thyself—pig, glutton wretch, beast, devil!"

Sima lay quiet. The Popadia found the door at last, and pushed it open, crying, "Mara!" No answer. "Mara!—She's gone. No doubt she fled when thou bellowedst so about thy vampire!" She stumped complacently back to bed, while Sima lay in consternation.

"Go to the outer door and call her, then," said he, with a quaver in his voice.

"Go thyself," replied the fat Popadia. "And if thou'dst like to beat me, I will prove a match for thee!"

Sima twisted and puffed, much daunted. What



would Maxim say? And the maid herself, where was she gone?—he remembered her threat to fling herself into the Lom. He had always loved and protected her through her short unhappy life: she alone of all the village girls had not been vain and sly and lying. He wanted to call her; he knew he ought to, left as she was in his care; but at dead of night, and alone. . . .

“At least come with me!” supplicated Sima.

“Now that thou speakest like a Christian, not a pig, I’ll come,” said the Popadia. Her curiosity was tugging at her when she first refused, and now had gained the victory. They tumbled out on either side the bed.

“I forgot there was a moon,” muttered the little Papst, as the white scene spread solemnly before him. “Mara!” he shouted. (“’Tis as light as day, though ghostly-looking.) Mara! Mara!”

“Thou’lt rouse the whole valley, howling thus,” said the Popadia, “like a were-wolf. Far better to put on thy sandals and gown, and sally out peaceably to find her.”

“But thou knowest that the bodies of those who die under the Church’s ban, fermanlia, are incorruptible, and, being possessed by evil spirits, lie in wait in lonely spots to murder men!”

“No one ever died here under Church’s ban, and the village next us is leagues away—besides, it ought to keep its devils to itself, and so it does, depend upon it. Go thou fearless on thy righteous errand, Sima, and the True God will see to thy safety. At least, if thou triest hard to save her, thou wilt not have *her* sins to roast for as well as thine own!”

Sima shuddered, and huddled on his garments, tying his old sandals all awry.

“Good-bye, Militza,” he said, looking earnestly upon her. “If I never should come back, I forgive thee all

thine offences against me, as a Christian ought to at such times. Remember to pray for me before the Ikon till I come back, or thou seest me carried in, a sacrifice. . . ." He ambled melancholy forth, beard wild, brow bent, and hair on end.

Sima went slowly, full of starts and qualms ; the very trees looked supernatural to him.

"I wonder if the Ikon will remember this on the last day, and put it to my credit? . . . How deadly white and still the valley is! I seem to see ghouls running quick across it to their feast upon the dead, close to the earth, like dogs and wolves. Jovan protect us! holy Ikon, guardian of our fiend-beleaguered village! At least I tried to do my duty, and to save the girl, although I perish for it!"

He tried to shout "Mara!" but it ended in a quaver; his own voice frightened him. What if it should bring some monster of the night out of the woods, were-wolf or bandog?

"What am I wandering thus for," thought the Papst, at last, "like one bereft of reason? I have braved the horrors of the night, yet cannot find her; I, who never stir beyond my door, once dusk has fallen. Surely I have done enough, and may return without an evil conscience. Scatheless I have bearded them, alone and single-handed, ghouls and ogres, basilisks and cockatrices!"

He was turning to reascend the gorge, quite self-complacent, when he saw a white shape coming through the trees below.

"Lost!" howled Sima, forgetting his quest and his boast, and pelting headlong towards home and the Popadia.

"Sima, Sima, don't be afraid!" cried a voice behind him—Mara's.

"Thou, child! I thought it was the king of all the devils," gasped the Papst, who at first but fled the

faster. "What have I gone through on thy account, thou wicked wench!"—he was half weeping. "Where hast thou been? Thou look'st taller by half—and laughing, too, as if thou'dst found a kingdom! What ails thee?"

"I could not see thee terrified like that, Father Sima, without speaking. I want thy blessing." She knelt before him, and the Papst laid fat fond hands on her proud head. "I thank thee. I remember all thy kindness in the past, and how thou helpedst me to-day—poor Maxim, too," she murmured, sighing. "Thou hast always shown me kindness, Father Sima, and I thank thee from the bottom of my heart." She rose. "Dobar stchast! good fortune! and good-bye. . . ." She turned away. He caught her by her garment.

"Where art thou going? What wouldst thou do?"

She stood for a second dumb; then flame itself leapt from her eyes.

"I overheard their foul conspiracy," she cried, "and I am going to tell the King!"

Sima stood staring, round-eyed and open-mouthed, while she dashed away and vanished up the gorge.

CHAPTER XVI

WAR

"He was as fressh as is the month of May.

That von of hem was blynd, and might not se,
But if it were with eyen of his mynde,
With which men seen after that they ben blynde.

He loved chivalrye,
Trowth and honour, freedom and curtesie."

GEOFFREY CHAUCER.

WALDEMAR'S first period of mourning closed on the night which saw him vow a loftier life, a purer soul, to the memory of Fredegonde. The reckless grief-stung blind unrest, so often beckoning to suicide, was over: the flame of pain burned steadier, though as fierce. The true ordeal began. The first phase was a wild and tortured dream, monstrous, unreal; the second was the definite, the actual, the future. It is not the fall, the breaking bones, the bleeding flesh, which hurt worst, but the effort to crawl onward. It is not the fever, but the mortal languor after; not the losing, but the consummated loss. There is an opiate in action; hope's illusion in uncertainty: the torture of suspense is edged with a sense of mighty possible relief. It is the dropping of a fragment of one's life into the gulf of the irrevocable, which brings forth despair; when we look to the lost past with tears of fire, and to the future with eyes leaden, dull, and cold.

Waldemar had reached the point where, broken, daunted, fallen, and alone, he heard the inexorable voice of life say, "Take up thy burden, and go on!" He was obeying, every sinew strained, each thrilling nerve at tension; making the first interminable steps, which trod their way on his own soul. To him every sight was a reminder; every sound, a memory; every thought, a pang; and every struggle to be calm, an agony. He had lost the light of his life, the influence which reconciled him to the great world of barter and exchange, of self-seeking and all material ends, by giving him sweet refuge from it. As a man comes out of battle full of wounds, and fears each hand which touches him will hurt him, the King shrank from the very light of day, and from the eyes of those about him. Gadatz alone, with all old age's solemn lore of sorrow, knew how to soothe his paroxysms of grief, and rouse him from despairing apathy. Their bond had grown strong as father's and son's since Waldemar had found the old man waiting there and heard him say, "I came to comfort you." Here was a friend tried to the soul, a heart heroic and devoted. Sometimes the King, eyes haggard, said:

"I never could have come so far without you!"

It was to Gadatz he owed the sane and steady influence against despair, which, sanctioned by words of Fredegonde, identified itself for him with her idea. It was with Gadatz that he consulted, worked, and studied, in his efforts for the country's good. It was from Gadatz that he imbibed the liberal ideas, so contrary to both the policy and instincts of the Premier, which, his generous nature for their garden, grew and broke in ardent blossom. It was Gadatz himself who, as in earlier days when he was master, the King pupil, regulated Waldemar's life and occupations with the tenderest tact, the wisest care. The

King would have plunged into incessant work, to keep his thoughts at arm's-length, but Gadatz feigned himself to need diversion and repose, and thus brought Waldemar to take them. If he thought his pupil needed sunshine and fresh air, he asked for a ramble in the garden; and then would seat himself near by, and counsel a sharp turn upon the walk beside the marble balustrade above the lake, where the view stretched freest. If he found too great a mental pressure, he would call for wine, when Theodosi mixed an opiate in the King's, which calmed, though unsuspected. If there were a gloom too sombre, he would beg his pupil to read aloud some poem; leaving its selection to Waldemar himself, who thus was often able to express the moods which otherwise consumed him in grim silence. The master counted on his pupil's noble soul, now doubly ready to console and aid; concealing his own unremitting vigilance and care under the pretext of an old man's whims to humour. The sight was strange and touching: youth in its sorrow-broken beauty guided by the old and blind, which it believed its own strength was sustaining. There is no wisdom deep as love's.

Gadatz was pleased to find Vassilio so brilliant, young, and glad: this vivid influence, like spring's own when she steals a day from winter, lessened Waldemar's dejection. The young man's voice, a ringing tenor, was as pleasing when he spoke as when he sang. Gadatz could not judge him by his face, as long experience had taught him it is wise to, but was attracted by his voice, with its frank tones and subtle modulations. The thought of a companion for Waldemar, whose careless youth should teach him to be young once more, pleased the old man secretly; he liked to have the handsome boy about him, watching his effect upon the King. He knew that



an unhappy soul accepts or rejects, with equal vehemence, a like companion: it either bitterly repels him as an image of itself in a mourned and happier life-aspect, or welcomes him with fond regret as kin to youth and hope and joy, the treasures it has lost. Waldemar's nature was too generous to take the envious attitude; his heart too lonely not to fall into the other's tender sense of sad half brotherhood. Andrassy was quick to see the preference, though not its motive, and to aid it. The morning after their ride, he heard Ilona singing softly at the meeting-place, and harmonised her song so that the King, last comer of the three, listened enchanted, rambling nearer.

"There is nothing sweeter than two voices sweetly tuned," said Waldemar, sighing; all sweet things were twinned with his idea of Fredegonde.

"Souls sweetly tuned are sweeter, surely, sire," murmured Vassilio. The King raised his eyes with haggard scrutiny, and met grave glances, not a smile. Perhaps the other comprehended, sympathised, could be a heart-friend to him—?

"Yes, Andrassy, you are right," he answered, with a wistful look which lingered.

That evening, for the first time, the aide-de-camp attended Waldemar upon his usual visit to Gadatz. The King was gloomy, irritable, restless: one of his racking headaches was upon him. There are moments when a man is like a lyre out of tune, from which no hand can draw a harmony. Theodosi had withdrawn on their arrival. Karaman, the boarhound, lay slowly down beside the King, with a growl and red fierce glance towards Andrassy. Vassilio leaned on the back of a tall carved chair, not sure what part to take, and waiting. Gadatz divined his pupil's mood, and sighed. The King, his head upon his hand, sighed also.

"Only an echo, I hope, your Majesty?" the old man asked, turning his sightless eyes towards him.

"More than an echo, Gadatz," said Waldemar, his tone profoundly sad.

"You have been too hard at work to-day," said the physician anxiously. "Have you been out of doors, and walked or ridden, sire?"

"No," said the King, "not since the birds were fed this morning. The very light of day seemed garish, blinding. Are you surprised, Gadatz? To every man, I think, come hours when he loathes the sun."

"Death is the only surprise left for the old. Your Majesty knows that in the human heart's strange chart, no sunken rocks or sudden whirlpools can astound me."

"I believe," pursued Waldemar feverishly, "that no depression is so crushing as that which we feel when we have struggled strongly to do good, yet know that our efforts can no more touch the world's gross mass of pain, than a child's weak wail can reach the mercy-seat and change the general destiny of man."

Gadatz kept silence: he divined it best to let the mood exhaust itself in speech. Vassilio watched the King keen-eyed, with lifted brows, and wondered he allowed the pain of others to disturb him. "If I were king," he thought, "I should work for my own power, if I worked for anything." He felt a sudden jealousy of Waldemar's unvalued kingship, and, by instinct, of his nobler soul.

"Sin, suffering, ignorance, hatred, hypocrisy, envy," the King went on. "Poverty, humiliation, ingratitude, cruelty, everywhere. Life is like the head of the Medusa, monstrous and mysterious, serpent-crowned. Its problems are too many and too vast," he cried, his weariness spurred onward by unrest and bitterness. "But first and worst of all is that of war. If we are not massacring our brothers in humanity

and progress, we are butchering the savage whom we ought to leave in peace or else to civilise: we must either cut our pound of flesh in conquered provinces, or filch the Naboth's vineyard of the murdered African. In less than half a century, Russia and England, France and Germany, Italy and Austria, Turkey and its tributary States here in the Balkans, have all been grappling to the death; races which, but for the gadfly statesmen and ambitious princes doing hell's work at their heads, would have ploughed their fields, and led their lives, and kept their boundaries in peace. Besides these wars, which have wasted the flower of eight kingdoms, the United States themselves were red with fire and blood—internecine strife, most foul and devilish of all, most loathsome, most revolting. Every few months some new destructive engine mocks the barbarous civilisation which produced it; and when our governments pay millions for the gun which carries farthest, the torpedo which rips deepest, the explosive which bursts fiercest, destroying man and woman together with their fiend-beleaguered hearth, what an irony it is to see the crazy anarchist who flings a bomb condemned by them to death as murderer! What has Christianity, all Europe's creed, to say?" pursued Waldemar, trembling with excitement. "Either Cain should never have been branded, or war should have been branded too! And yet the wars of the Israelites are celebrated in the Holy Book, and not a pulpit in all Christendom has dared to launch on war the Church's malediction. If war still rages, to what purpose did the noble Galilean proclaim peace on earth? Has Christianity preached peace for nineteen hundred years, only that the pagan giant War may strangle prostrate Europe? And war so devilish, where Civilisation's arts are prostituted to destroy her children; where personal valour is a

cipher, and we only want the field of flesh to plough with steel and iron! In the days of Cæsar's legions, it was man to man: in our days it is man to a mitrailleuse!"

"Your Majesty, what is the use of views like these, when greed and pride and envy rule the world? Cut these three cancers out of human nature first; and, from the body politic, dishonest, weak, or too-subservient ministers; and, from the throne, those monarchs envious of their neighbours, greedy of the robbery named conquest, and proud of power to the point of buying it with nations sent to death, like sheep to slaughter."

"Right, Gadatz," said Waldemar; "but that will never be—unless after a stronger creed arises, and a truer civilisation is matured."

"I was always taught to look on Cæsar and Napoleon as the greatest men on earth," ventured Vassilio. "Wars are the landmarks of history, and generals its milestones. Even chivalry was founded on the knight's vow to fight paynims and caitiffs for his lady. I, myself, wear a sword, and I almost wonder how the world would do without war!"

He laughed, but checked himself. The solemn sightless eyes were on him.

"Have you ever felt a wound?"

Vassilio blushed before Gadatz's gaze, and changed his posture, with a clink of spurs and sabre. Karaman lifted his head, surveyed him from his blood-red eye-pits, and then growled.

"Down!" exclaimed the King: the strong brute cowered. "Thou also! . . . It is nature's lesson, war! She teaches it in every teeming inch of air and water, in every form of life. It is born in our blood, instilled by every sight, and, last, confirmed by barbarous tradition. Were we not steeped in its idea, its hideous mask would horrify the world. Did war step

unfamiliarised before us, it would be more cursed and dreaded than the plague!"

"Habit," muttered Gadatz, with the weariness of old age and experience united. "Habit, sire, the master of the world. It always bars the gate to thought and progress."

"Yes; but the soul is the soul, and must conquer sloth and habit, nature's foul dictate of war itself, and rise, and raise the standard of creation! Strange," said the King, his voice grown soft upon a sudden, "but even nature seems to have forbidden war to man. He alone stands naked and defenceless, in the midst of a creation armed! The snake is fanged, the eagle beaked and taloned, the bull horned; the lion has his teeth, the elephant his mighty trunk and tusks, the crocodile his armour and his jaws; the scorpion stings, the python crushes, the whale strikes with a tail whose blow makes whirlpools; even the molecules, invisible in air and water, fight strange battles with fantastic arms. . . . Man has no scales, claws, fangs, horns, sting, beak, crushing coils, to arm him. He stands alone, in perfect purity of form, unweaponed, yet is bloodier than the brutes!"

"All creation's physical manifestations seem directed by a corrupt moral force. Life is a greater tragedy than death," muttered Gadatz.

"So much the stronger reason for mankind to read the lesson of a higher hope and type in their own bodies, and let it lead their souls to the ideal. Then, instead of Peace armed till she totters at the weight of weapons and of mail she carries; Peace on the brink of war's red gulf, down which a fillip of some finger, guilty, rash, or careless, may project her; Peace who shrinks afraid, her very name the scoff of nations taxed to beggary for worse than war; there would be the old and holy peace which ploughed the fields, and fed the hungry with their harvest. War! the

curse of our century, Gadatz; the Baal we adore instead of Christ!"

"Useless, sire, useless," said the old man. "The world's brain is too young, its heart too old."

"Man discovers imperfections everywhere but in himself," rejoined the King. "We march on, singing our pæan of progress, while the mark of Cain is crimson on our brows. Where is the remedy? The peoples groan already like the land before an earthquake; but rulers and statesmen push their petty 'policy' ahead, and take no heed of universal needs and mandates. . . ." He paused: he was thinking of Fokshany and his "questions of expediency." He sickened. "Barbarous! But they say that those who live by a volcano never fear it. . . . Since war survives," cried Waldemar, "why not the oracle?—I long to see the end. Yes, I would look over the edge of time into the dusk where all our stars go down. . . ."

"What do you see there?"

"Woman."

The King paused softly on the word: to him it represented Fredegonde. The pure, the beautiful, the constant, the ideal, for him were bound together in the name. He went on slowly, as if musing to himself, his eyes agaze and steadfast.

"For centuries the Christian Church has ruled, and woman has been slave. Yet, though the Church preached peace, it meant, and made, and sanctioned war. I believe, if in every Christian church war were denounced, that war would be abolished. But the Church has ruled, and fed on war for nineteen centuries; it failing, woman is the force which must succeed it. . . . Aroused, and shaking off her chains of ignorance, the lowest bondage, stands the mother of the world. What is her mission? She is blinded and uncertain; shades her eyes with trembling hands.



Not to usurp man's turbulent sphere; not to stand alone, defiant, armed, yet unprotected; not to scorn the home, the softer aspects of the world whose rush is so bewildering and cruel; not to stand against man, but beside him, grace near strength, and love by honour; use, not squander, her surpassing power; make certain before taking the first step. If woman arose in her millions and denounced it, war would be unable to exist. It is hers to mould the coming generation in those hands so soft and yet so strong; to bear sons who drink the war-hate with their mother's milk, and daughters who refuse to give their beauty's prize to soldiers. Woman could solve the problem, if she would. Perhaps war is the Eden-serpent's head she was to bruise. . . . It is she who is bereaved; the widow, mother, sister, and beloved of the slain. It is she who receives back, bleeding, hacked, her flesh and blood, or that which is yet dearer than her own. . . . Let her waken, and welcome her mission! Let her shine as our Angel of Peace! Let her vindicate and prove her finer nature, leading ever on to the Ideal!"

There was silence. Gadatz felt the dream too holy to break in on with one uttered doubt. Vassilio stood amazed; an unsuspected range of thought and feeling opened to his mind. Waldemar suddenly sighed, a bitter sigh.

"I see it, but so far away! . . . Let us forget. Oblivion is the paradise of this late rotten world." . . . He leant his brows on his clasped hands; the pain was throbbing there like living fire. Silence again; then he abruptly rose.

"Andrassy, order the horses. Gadatz, I am weary to death; good-night. . . . May you find a pillow quieter than mine!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE WILD HUNTSMAN

“Le démon répond quand on s'adresse aux anges.

Ils passaient effrayants, muets, masqués de fer.

Il est le fort ami du faible.”

VICTOR HUGO.

L OUBITZA was serving Stroimir, Lazar, and Jovan at table, before the departure of the Archimandrite for his Kloster. She had set out her best for the monk and the Haiduk, and plied her spindle while the three men talked and ate. Castradina was before them, meat dried slowly in the sun till hardened, while retaining its nutritive juices, and capable of conservation for a score of years; ouklieva, a kind of mullet to be found in the stream near by at certain times, then dried and smoked; cooked olives, pulse, a cheese, cherries fresh from the tree, goat's milk, maize-bread, hard eggs, and Turkish coffee. Besides these, a bottle of raki was prepared, with bread and castradina, for Jovan on his ride. Loubitza looked wistfully about the table, as she twirled her distaff, certain still that all was not complete. One of her urchins thrust his head in at the door—the children were forbidden while the guests sat at their meat. His eyes roved, and he licked his lips.

“Give me some honey, Maika Loubitza!”

That was what the housewife had forgotten: the

produce of her swarms whose hives were in the hollowed trunks of trees. She dealt the urchin a cuff and a buffet, and then put the natural sweetmeat on the board. At the moment, the men were making the farewell toast, *zdravitz*a, in native wine. Not a word was breathed, but each knew that the drinking-cups were brimmed and lifted to "The Plot!"

Before they could drink to it, Sima burst in, and stood breathless, puffing wildly.

"Welcome, Sima!" cried Lazar, with his keenest smile. "Hast thou been chased here by some devil?"

"She is flown!" gasped the Papst. "I meant to tell you long before the sunrise—but we overslept ourselves like pigs—because—I braved all Szargol's legions for her there at dead of night before I found her—She's flown—gone to the King!"

"Gone!" groaned Maxim, entering.

"To the King—!" The voice of Stroimir burst from him like thunder from the storm-cloud. Lazar's drinking-cup broke in his grasp. Jovan turned pale as ivory, but spoke.

"What did she say that she was going for, Father Sima?"

Sima patted his stomach in distress, and seemed unable to get out another word. The rest watched him lynx-like: Jovan standing forward, with his noble bearing dauntless still; Stroimir at full his giant height, hands clenched; old Lazar with his arm stretched for his carbine. Maxim watched Lazar, not the Papst, while Loubitz'a cursed the spilt wine which had ruined her *ouklieva*. Bosilika and Miloutim had followed Maxim. The door was full of children's roguish faces. Sima shook his head, and waved his arms as if in heat of exorcism, but still imparted nothing. Suddenly the thunder-voice of Stroimir pleaded out again in fury.

"Speak! Reply! What errand is she gone on?"

Sima cast a sheepish quaking glance towards the Haiduk's mighty form.

"To betray some plot, she said . . ." he quavered.

Lazar brought the eight-foot carbine pounding down from its rack on the wall behind him. Stroimir took a rash stride forward, which caused the little Papst to back and trample on the crowding children's toes ; while Jovan, standing still, said :

"We must find her."

"Ay!" shouted Lazar, with the howl of a hungry wolf on a traveller's track. "We will find her!"

"We will find her," repeated Jovan, in a voice, not loud, which Maxim's marrow trembled at. The young man slipped a long knife and his holiday pistols with their ivory carved handles in his sash ; took advantage of the riot of confusion to seize the loaf and the raki prepared for Jovan ; and, getting out unnoticed, began to run like a hare for the gorge at the end of the valley, from whence led the way to Lasnitza.

"They will ride," he thought breathlessly, "and must take the long way round like the stream Ovchariza ; but their speed will make up for the circuit. They count on cutting her off at the forest of Jagoda, and I must reach her before it ! Then I can hide her in its depths for days, with this bread and raki, and the water of some blessed stream, to live on—the vili will aid us!—and then I'll escape with her into the wide world beyond the valleys, where they can never find her, or she betray the cause." He reached the sheltering trees of the gorge ; cast one look back, of terror and farewell, towards his home ; and then ran swift as a stag, on, upward, past the falls where he had saved her, and away.

While Maxim was stealing out of the house, the place became a babel. Loubitza screamed to know what was the matter, suspecting that Mara's flight alone had never caused the three men's deadly

passion. The children screeched when Sima's weight came tramping backwards on them. Lazar roared for the horses, blaspheming like a Turk, and brandishing the carbine he had often picked the Moslems off with, as fast as he could sight them, in the old days of combat, fire, and blood. Jovan's voice, strong as his Kloster bell cast in the days of Douchan, ordered silence. Miloutim, commanded by his father, had gone to saddle and fetch the horses. Bosilika was despatched away to the milking, with the children, by Loubitza. Sima, horrified to see the sentence set in those three louring faces, clear as lightning's lurid letters on the branded brow of night, began exhorting them to calm, to peace, to love, to mercy. He was so appalled at the result of his disclosure, so panic-struck for Mara, that he quite forgot himself, and grew as brave as any sparrow.

"Let *one* go!" cried Sima. "Why should ye all go? What would ye all be doing with the girl? If ye find her, she is but woman-flesh, and needs no army's strength to take her. Come, Lazar, cease to blaspheme—thou wilt lose thy soul, I tell thee, by the beard of thine Elias!—cease to blaspheme so awfully, and *we* will set off together, you and I. *We* will find her, and fetch her back; and thenceforth she shall come to live with me and the Popadia. I know thou lov'st her awry for her birth, but we are childless, and will take her. Besides, her dead mother left her in my care when she was scarce an hour old. Come, come! To horse!"

"Hell roast thee, Sima!" yelled Lazar, foaming. "Silence! Get thee gone!" The old wolf brandished his carbine so fiercely that Jovan himself drew the Papst to the door, and, fixing his fearless eyes upon him, said:

"Am I not guarantee?"

"Would that thou wert!" muttered Sima, shaking

with excitement in his old black gown, and puffing loudly. "Would thou wert Michael the Archangel, or an army, for alone thou never canst prevail. There is not another horse in the valley but Lazar's and thine and the Haiduk's, Jovan! A matter of life and death," he gasped, "yet not one other horse!"

"Fear nothing, Father Sima," said the Archimandrite, with his lofty air of power. "My office is sacred, like your own, and where I go, no maiden blood is shed."

Sima had all the instinct of fear which distinguishes the lower animals; and he was hard of reassurance, especially as Jovan unintentionally awed him.

"She could come to live with me and the Popadia," he cried, nearly weeping, fat hands flabby at his sides. "Thou wouldst never see her, even, since thou hatest her so—which is mortal sin, Lazar, as I've told thee before this, and leadeth to much hell-fire."

"Where are the horses? I'll saddle my own, to make short work!" shouted Lazar. Stroimir strode out, Loubitza shrinking as he passed her, with a fearful frown. Sima stood silent, madly revolving plan after plan in his bewildered head. He heard the horses coming.

"Cursed be the name of murder!" he burst out, desperate. "Cursed be the sight of blood! Cursed of God be the slayer, and the heart that plans the crime!"

Loubitza turned pale, but dared not breathe a word of question or remonstrance: it was said that the termagant's self had felt the weight of Lazar's bony arm. The horses came trampling up, all fresh, and snuffing the clear air of spring and morning: Miloutim led Lazar's and the monk's, while Stroimir sat regally his own black Arab. Jovan mounted;

Lazar, pushing past the Papst in rage and spite, pressed close to Stroimir, and whispered :

"Hast thou a knife?"

The Haiduk smiled—a sombre smile.

"Thou wilt ask me for my head or my right hand, next."

"I would ask thee is it sharp; but were it blunt, I'd make it serve!" the old wolf gnarled through his set teeth. "If thou hast it, it is sharp; and so I shall not take my carbine, lest these fools begin to bray of—murder. . . ." His face, thrust forth and up, was hideous with a grin and sneer fit for a plotting devil's. He tossed his carbine to Miloutim, and, mounting, turned without salutes to ride away.

"Lazar!" cried Sima, "if thou comest back without her, I swear by the Ikon to accuse thee to the village. I have warned thee!"

But the restive beasts had started on, and Sima's words were trampled under by their hoof-beat's gallop. The Papst remained shaking warning fingers after them, then suddenly he cried aloud :

"A thought!"

Half an hour later he was jolting up the valley on a little grey droop-eared ass. The long-bodied, short-legged, pot-bellied Papst and his mount made a quaint appearance; Sima, unaccustomed, keeping on as best he might, while the donkey disappeared beneath its rider.

"Would that my figure were more youthful!" thought the Papst. "Though I eat but little besides bacon. At least where I can lead, this ass can follow." And he called to the Popadia, for his house had come in sight.

"A loaf and a piece of castradina, Militza. Nay, curb that tongue of thine, and ask no questions. Fie, then! quick!—and a little skin of wine to tie behind the ass's saddle."

Five minutes later he was toiling up the gorge, puffing sorely, with the downcast donkey, while the poor Popadia was flying to her gossips in the valley to tell the news that Sima had gone mad.

All the long day, Mara walking forward. All the dread day, Maxim pressing on. All the hot day, Sima and the donkey, the Papst sometimes off and sometimes on, trudging along. All the fierce day, Stroimir, Lazar, and Jovan riding towards the forest. . . . The sun went down.

Night, and the moon rising coldly silver. The three men had reached Jagoda.

"Jovan," said Stroimir, "Lazar and I will cross the forest on foot: do thou skirt it, leading our horses, as far as the Devil Stone."

"The place of the church the Wild Huntsman threw down in the night—that ghostly monstrous rock?"

"Yes; but the horses may stumble and shy at it, or even break away, so hold them fast. There watch the woods, and catch the girl if she attempts to pass thee; meanwhile, we will track her through until we meet thee at the brink, unless she has got forward."

Jovan turned to them solemn-browed; they rode at either hand of him.

"Stroimir and Lazar, we are bound in sacred bonds of brotherhood, all three. Swear to me, first, that you mean no harm to the girl if you go without me."

"We mean no harm to her," answered the others.

"Swear it upon our bond."

The silence was broken by the far hoot of an owl, and that alone; then Stroimir said:

"I swear."

"And I," added Lazar in his grating voice, while he mutely vowed to offer to his Ikon for the perjury.

"Brothers, you have sworn, and I believe you. Go

your ways. You are accountable to me and the True God."

Lazar and Stroimir, dismounting, gave their bridles to the Archimandrite; then, without a word, strode on into the belt of shadow, and were gone.

"We shall reach there before him, no matter what business we find to despatch on the way," muttered Lazar. "Shalt thou keep thy vow, Stroimir? Dar'st thou to break it?"

"I dare all," said the Haiduk.

"If Elias or Szargol send her into our clutches, I'll offer a thousand para to the Ikon to buy him a new gilt frame. To rid the earth of that gipsy bastard, that thorn which has festered in my side for sixteen years! . . . Didst thou know I struck at her once with my spade?—the blow would have *killed* another."

"War, not murder, is work for men," said Stroimir, with deep repugnance.

"What, wilt thou let her go to-night, if the moon and the devil betray her?"

"What will be done to-night," said Stroimir, "is justice, not murder. She has brought it on herself."

"Then thou fearest not devils nor saints," chuckled Lazar. "Thou shalt despatch her thyself—the vermin!"

"We will draw lots," answered Stroimir. "If the lot is mine, my hand is steady."

They strode on fast through the mighty trees; it was one of the country's forests of oaks. The moon glanced in through the leaf-gaps like a face grown white with fear. The round-eyed owls glared and hooted, disturbed; and a wind stole through the tree-tops with a sound like the roar of ocean's wrath heard in the calm of ocean's depths.

"The jade has run fast, or has doubled like the vixen that she is," said Lazar at length.

"I will find her and kill her," thundered Stroimir, "were the Usurper between us with an army!"

"What!" grinned the old wolf. "How hot thou art for blood! She's not *thy* daughter's bastard!"

"She may be my son's death and my own, though," said the Haiduk, with savage intensity of accent.

"And mine!" snarled Lazar, gasping as if the thought had caught him by the throat.

"Her life," said Stroimir, "is less than a fly's, compared with Miloutim's future. Sooner than let her escape with what she knows, I would stab her, were she my own child!"

His eyes were fire: he remembered his father, at whose dauntless flank he fought the Turks; remembered the treacherous surprise which parted them, the effort to return, the shot that ended all as Vlastimir regained his country's shore. His passion for his son, and his passion for revenge, were the lode-stars of the Haiduk's life; better beard a lion tracking prey than threaten one or doubt the other. Miloutim's shortcomings never reached his sight; the youth was for Stroimir the dear continuance of his father's wronged heroic line.

"Perhaps the fiend has made us miss her," muttered Lazar, hardly above his breath. They had walked for hours: it was midnight, and the forest nearly passed.

"A thousand devils!" the Haiduk growled, the baulked beast of prey in his voice. "What was that, down the glade? Something moved!" he exclaimed.

"I thought I glimpsed a figure," gasped the old wolf, setting off at the speed of a greyhound.

A minute passed: dead silence; far away a screech-owl's cry. Stroimir strode forward, straining his eyes. The kingdom hung upon these minutes. . . . A shout.

"Here! Quick! 'Tis she!"



He followed the voice, saw Lazar running, doubling, turning, ever baffled by the white shape which flitted like a wraith between the mighty trunks, in ghostly light and sombre shadow.

"Devil!" called Lazar. "She-devil, surrender! . . . Hell roast thee! Surrender, I say!"

Stroimir rushed forward like a lion from his lair, and mutely joined the chase. Mara saw him, and shrieked, a wild shriek of despair that seemed to cleave the heavens. She turned again, doubled; then, swift as a hare, flew straight down the glade which led out of the forest.

"Fire of hell!" shouted Lazar, pursuing. "A curse on my rotten bones! I shall lose her. . . ." Breathless, teeth clenched, he pressed forward. Her foot caught an oak root: she fell.

As he reached her, hands greedily stretched, she was up on her knees already, and struggling to rise. He pitched headlong beside her, clutching her garments: the same root had tripped them both. No sooner was Lazar down than he felt a knife-thrust deep in his shoulder. He roared—another—another!

"Hell and blood, she's stabbed me!" he yelled.

"Enough!" thundered Stroimir, seizing the knife, and pinioning her hands.

Mara sent shriek upon shriek to the skies, till the midnight echoes clamoured.

"Silence!" commanded the Haiduk. "Pray for thy soul: no help is near!"

"Maxim! Maxim! Maxim!" she shrieked till the farthest forest resounded, and a thousand echoes seemed a thousand voices promising aid. Holding her hands by one of his own, the Haiduk felt for a cord in his sash; and, binding her wrists and elbows, thrust a handkerchief into her mouth. The echoes died like hope, and the forest resumed its midnight

silence, except for some far faint sounds which might have been a night-bird's cry.

"See to thy sins and thy soul," said Stroimir sternly. "Thy time is until we have drawn the lots."

A muffled moan of despair, too low for even the saints to hear it.

"Ah, thou adder, thou'rt safe and gagged!" gasped Lazar, climbed to his feet at last. "Give me thy token thou wearest there in thy bosom: we'll cast the lots with that!"

Mara writhed as he seized the gift of Sima, and broke its string. Why had she told where she was going, to the Papst? She had been mad—mad—mad!

"Here, Stroimir; choose! The hand with the cursed medal in it must strike her!" The old wolf grinned, and laughed aloud, which drowned a cry in the distance.

"Impious!" said Stroimir. "This is no work of the saints, to mix with holy tokens. Be not so bestial, Lazar, lest you lose your soul alive." The Haiduk looked about him. "Here, let us seek for some dropped acorn." They strode to a slant of moonlight, while Mara strained her cords. An inch more there at the elbows and her fingers could reach the handkerchief: she could shriek in desperate answer to the far-off cries she heard. These cords were cruel as iron bands; they cut till blood was flowing. But half an inch more, Mother of Christ! and the handkerchief would be out . . .!

"Choose, Lazar," said Stroimir, extending closed fists as strong as the knotted boughs above. Then suddenly, "Hoof-beats!—is that a far-off bay of hounds? The Huntsman, Lazar! . . . Yonder towers the Devil Stone—the Wild Huntsman is riding by!"

Lazar's hair bristled.

"I hear the hoofs! 'Twas my sacrilege with the medal! Silence! A sound, and we're lost—"

A shriek which seemed to split the heavens.

"Devil-begotten!" yelled Lazar, leaping to where he had left the girl. She had crawled on her knees to the nearest tree, and was hidden beyond. Mad with fear, he could not find her. . . . The hoofs galloped nearer—nearer. Stroimir heard a loud halloo. Another shriek, like a cry from the damned, pealed wildly out across it. . . . The two men stood frozen with terror: a huge hound burst into view. His rolling bay, which was echoed by distant shouts from the farther forest, answered. . . . Shriek upon shriek, till the heavens grew deaf with the agony of the cry. Stroimir stood stiff with the knife in his hand. The Huntsman was upon them.

"They are murdering me!" screamed Mara, mad with the delirium of her own wild voice. "Help! I am bound! I am waiting here for my death while they draw the lots!"

Stroimir and Lazar were full in the moonlight: the Haiduk's broad blade gleamed. Two horsemen thundered up at a gallop: the others, terror-blinded, saw them huge and indistinct.

"Quick! Toss her up here before me!"

Vassilio leapt from his horse. A second later Mara lay swooning, fast in the powerful arms of the King.

"They are men!" shouted Stroimir, rushing on as Andrassy sprang to the saddle. "The Usurper himself!" he roared, stopped dead, as if shot, in his mad-bull charge.

The King, his reins embarrassed by Mara's dead weight, was trying to turn his horse, when the name was hurled full in his face. For a second their eyes met, doubtful, fierce, sons of victim and murderer. Then Lazar screeched, "Men—! Not the Spirit!" and rushed to hale the girl from his arms.

"On, Karaman!" thundered Waldemar, and the hound sprang straight at the old wolf's throat. At the same time, Stroimir flung himself forward, lion-like, on his enemy. His broad knife gleamed aloft . . . then dropped to the ground, and his shattered arm to his side. A report rang out. A pistol-shot from Vassilio had broken the Haiduk's wrist.

"Karaman, here!" shouted Waldemar, turning his horse and galloping back. Other voices were heard coming up: the voices Mara had called to.

"Maxim!" she cried, reviving, with his well-known tones in her ears.

But Waldemar and Vassilio were away at a thundering gallop, Karaman baying beside them, the murderous forest far behind.

CHAPTER XVIII

DRAGON'S TEETH

"I live with bread like you, feel want, taste grief,
Need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me I am a king?

If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow, and which will not."

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

IT was dawn; the early dawn of early summer. The lake stretched golden, and the sun, like a wheel of gold, seemed rolling down a ridge of purple cloud. Mara, who had abandoned herself to the joy of flight till now, the intoxication of rescue, believing the Wild Huntsman's self was her saviour, roused at last from her dream of wonder and terror, as dawn streamed aureate banners in the east. The lark was singing in highest heaven, a song of joy and love. The girl remembered that Sima had told her the Huntsman, riding after dawn, must lose a night's sport for every star still bright in the morning sky. Yet they rode, and rode, and the dawn grew gold: at last Mara took courage to turn and look at the face of the rider who held her so safe with his strong and tireless arm. She gave a long sigh of relief and content—no ghastly mask, no fleshless skull, no fire-eyed fiend of the night was here: she had met the noble gaze of the King, with its sadness and compassion. At the same time, the Königsee broke into view: golden waters ringed with moun-

tains' shadowy amethyst. A thought burst on Mara.

"Art thou St. Jovan," she murmured, "taking me to the King?"

Waldemar did not hear her; her voice was sunk to a whisper of gratitude and awe. So strong, so beautiful, so calm, with those pale brows and deep blue eyes! who could he be but a saint, with that heavenly face, and yet afraid of no man?

"It is not the face of the Ikon, yet it makes me wish to pray," thought Mara. "It makes me wish to adore the True God for saving me from death. . . . Perhaps St. Jovan knew what I suffered all my life, as he was the Ikon of the village, and came to help me—I used to pray to him instead of to Elias. Can it be he?" She remembered weird stories which Sima had read from old Slavonic books he had—part of that store of strange belongings which made the village think the Papst was half a wizard—stories of miracles and martyrs; images which raised the hand to bless or curse: of the Ikon who stepped down from gilded ground and frame to quench the flames, while the pious family prayed near the walls of a distant kloster; and the great iron angel which fell from its spire and killed an adulterous priest at the altar, before he could lift the holy bread to distribute to the worshippers. "Perhaps," thought Mara, "he made them believe him the Spirit, appearing all grim and black; and then returned to his proper shape. He is like some grand white-winged archangel." A curve in the hillside, and Königslust was before them. "It cannot be Sokol the Falcon, for there is the lake Lasnitz; and yet, it seems like the castle risen from ruin, returned to the days of Czar Lazar."

"Andrassy," said Waldemar, drawing rein, "let food and wine, and bath and bed, be ready for the

girl when I shall bring her back. I am going to Ilona."

Vassilio bowed, and rode to the postern door which led to the private staircase. Mara turned, with glowing eyes of gratitude, and spoke.

"Oh, my saviour, art thou not sweet St. Jovan, who is Ikon of our village Ovchariza, and to whom I prayed instead of to Elias?"

"What, my child?" answered Waldemar, smiling.

"No, I am not St. Jovan."

Mara looked at him earnestly.

"Art thou an angel in disguise?"

"No," he said, with sudden sadness, "or I might have greater power of doing good."

"But thou art not the Spirit they feared—the Wild Huntsman?" she asked, a second doubtful, yet ashamed of such a doubt.

"No, again; not the Wild Huntsman," said Waldemar, bitterly thinking of hours when body and soul were possessed by a fiend as grim, now latent in every drop of blood.

"But I thought thou wert Jovan, the Saint of our village, come to save me, and take me to the King. They say he is 'gracious and merciful,' and never has refused a gift or boon. Where is he?" Mara asked, glancing afraid at the great stone flank of the castle. "I came to warn him! How can I find him?"

"I am the King," said Waldemar.

The girl caught her breath, slipped out of his hold to the ground, knelt, and fervently kissed his bridle.

"Lord of our lives! my preserver!" she murmured, bowing her beautiful head.

He sprang from his horse.

"Rise, my child," he said, in a tone of sweet authority. "He is king who is best, not he whom Fortune's wheel flings highest. Rise! we are sister

and brother in the brotherhood of man. Thou hast thy purity, and I my vow to aid the suffering."

Mara lifted startled eyes, amazed. "Sister and brother" from the King! The symbol of love and protection; the brother's sacred name by which a sister swears! She rose and approached him with the sweet humility of reverence and gratitude, then bent and kissed his hand. "Sister to thee, as the glow-worm to the star, O my saviour, my preserver!" He felt her tears falling warm and softly, large as summer rain.

"Brother to thee, as the sun to the rose," said Waldemar, with tender gravity. "And now, little sister, follow me, leading the horse, till we find him some dewy pasture."

Ilona was in the garden, leaning on the marble balustrade, looking away to the gates of the day where the sun was rising golden. Standing in the garden, cloudless skies above, and restful green about her; daisies in the grass, a robin nesting near; a bank of honeysuckle, sweet as spring's own breath, stretching breezeward creamy clusters; bird-voices celebrating love's eternal mass in the temple of another year. Ilona saw the dawn, the flowers, heard the birds, with one thought behind all—the King. Had she begun to found an influence on him yet, cast even that humblest and yet strongest spell of habit? She had accustomed him to see another woman feed the birds where Fredegonde had fed them: another waiting at the balustrade where she had often stood beside him. Could she accustom him to let that newer influence take every day another step towards his heart? Could she push an alien key between the jealous wards of that tried heart, and subtly turn it, every day a notch, a catch? . . . World of the springtime! if not, what use to live? What is sweet life without thy mate, O bird? What



is fair life without the sun, O flower? What are thy days without the spring, O year? Swallow, what are thine without the summer?

Ilona knew that the King was gone on one of his midnight rides. She was cruelly anxious, afraid that some evil had reached him, recalling the dawn when Jephtimi rode back spent and alone. . . . A bitter jealousy wrung her, thinking of Fredegonde.

"He rides to meet her! He follows her phantom! If it led him down to the lake, and down again to its bottomless depths, he would follow!—follow through life and death," she muttered, "as I would follow him!"

She was gazing far to the sunrise, full of contradictory passions. To be lord of pain, that he might not suffer; and lord of bliss, that he might enjoy; and lord of love, that she alone might fill his life, past, present, future, and hereafter! And yet, when she thought of the other, she longed to double his pain: to pursue him with bitterness, fever, unrest, thirst of joy, till he found her love mercy. And yet, she would pour out her life-blood to shield him from enemy or harm; watch the night through on her knees by his bed when stealthy Death stole near him. And yet, again, and yet . . . ah! why did she love him, hate him, so? Why did their lives not join in love, as twin streams in a river?

A subtle thrill in the blood: she turned, and saw him coming forward. She was stricken through at the sight of him, pale, haggard with fatigue and sleeplessness. Confusedly, as their eyes met, she felt love was too strong: his ill would be her anguish.

"King Waldemar!" she cried, hastening to meet him, radiant in spite of her anxiety. "You are tired—these night rides will kill you!—you must not stay to

feed the birds. Come back to the castle, and let me take care of you; order some breakfast, and nurse you. Remember, I was your nurse before. Were you twice the King, you must obey me!"

He smiled as she made her low court curtsey, saying these rebel words, and thought of Theodosi's praises, with the feeling that his faith in her at least would not deceive him.

"I well remember my nurse's care," said Waldemar, leaning on the balustrade, and pulling sprays and wreaths of honeysuckle nearer for their fragrance. "I have come with a grace to ask her, which her womanly heart will welcome: a gift she will not refuse. We saved a girl from death to-night."

Ilona paled.

"You have been in danger! . . . Why will you go on those madman's rides?" As the word leapt out, she blushed and paled, so that death and life seemed to succeed each other on the face which sudden shame averted. "Forgive me . . ." she murmured, breathless. Had she divided him from her for ever?

"I ride to escape from madness," the King said sadly, his hand releasing the flowers. "You do not know what that means. . . . If you did, you could not reproach me."

Two tears fell fast from the eyes she lifted to his, her soul in the look.

"How can I tell you what I feel?" she murmured. "How can I ask your forgiveness?"

"No pardon is needed," said Waldemar, mournfully gazing across to the mountains. "I have found fate cruel, and pardoned fate; but you have been kind to me always. I never forget a word or look of solicitude or affection. They are too precious in a world so rotten with hypocrisy as this."

"Then you believe that I, at least, am true-hearted?" cried Ilona. "Only a woman can tell how I pity you,



left without the sympathy of—her you loved. . . . Forgive me, King Waldemar . . . ” she bent her head, white fingers closely clasping.

There was silence ; then a thrush broke sweetly into song beside his nesting mate. The King sighed, glancing at the bird, which balanced on a spray with swelling throat and heart of gladness.

“My life is ended,” he answered, “but my labour just begun. I am young, and have many years of work before me—effort and probation. Sympathy like yours is dear to me, Countess Ilona ; it makes me grateful to woman, whom she taught me in her person to adore.” He paused : her bold heart fluttered like a netted bird ; she stole a swift glance at his profile. Some day she would teach those eyes to seek her own, and make confession that his life was but beginning ! “And now,” said Waldemar, rousing from his contemplation of the solemn mountains mirrored in the lake, “let me ask you the favour I should have asked of—another, had she been here.” He paused ; emotion and fatigue made him pale.

“You are ill !” she cried, a ring of terror in her voice which startled him and nerved him.

“No,” he said ; “too tired, perhaps—not ill. But this girl whom we rescued : may I ask your protection for her ? We found her shrieking for help in Jagoda, two ruffians with naked knives in their hands about to murder her. I am going to hear her story when we both have taken some rest, but first I came to ask you to care for her, reassure her, as alone a woman can, with womanly wisdom and kindness. Will you do this for me, Countess Ilona ?”

“This, and anything, King Waldemar.” He could not divine in her steadfast tender manner the jealousy and exultation in her heart. He had come to her as if to Fredegonde !—and yet, what girl was this ? what

tragedy, romance, to chain his interest? Joy and distrust struck fire like flint and steel: why was the way so cruel?

"Now I have another thing to thank you for," he said, with his seldom smile so sweet that one forgot its infinite sadness.

"Where is the girl?" she asked. "You must not stay here longer: I want to see you safe with Theodosi."

"I told her to wait with my horse," said Waldemar, leading the way to the castle through the intervening trees. "Look!" he said, and paused. Mara had gathered a bunch of grass and was holding it up to the creature, her arm thrown white on his neck's dark gloss, her cheek pressed caressingly against him. Karaman, couchant, with keen ears pricked, heard his master's step, but would not leave his post. The King came forward, and was about to speak, when the girl saw Ilona.

"Thou, most noble and beautiful, thou!" she cried, with a curtsy, kissing her hand as the girls of the valley did when they met a priest or the head of a household. "Ah, had it not been for meeting thee on the Day of the Kralize, I should never have known that the King was a refuge, 'gracious and merciful!' I thank thee!"

"We will speak of it later, child," said Ilona, taking her by the hand. "Come with me; I will care for thee kindly. Your Majesty, here is Theodosi."

She smiled as she saw the anxious physician, beard ruffled, eyes heavy with sleep, come out. "Theodosi, a cordial, hot meat, and a light opiate, for the King has ridden to Jagoda, fought two brigands like a paladin, and saved this girl, so now he needs the eye of nurse and doctor. Your Majesty, I shall know, when I see you again, whether you have obeyed our instructions!" She nodded, smiled archly, and

disappeared, with Mara, through the door of the White Tower.

The King rose at midday, refreshed, and called for his favourite aide-de-camp. Vassilio was ready; his elastic physique and buoyant youth recuperated quickly. He entered with a brilliant smile of greeting and a bow whose grace no elder courtier could tutor.

"At your Majesty's commands," he said, his bright eyes fixed on Waldemar. Karaman couched at his master's feet, and his hair on back and huge neck bristled.

"Andrassy," said the King, "you saved my life last night, do you remember?"

"A lucky shot, merely, your Majesty," said Vassilio, with a touch of capricious indifference. "You do me too much honour when you say I saved your life!"

"Were you not with me during my illness?" pursued Waldemar.

"Yes, sire, I watched in turn with Theodosi and the Countess."

"Tell me"—the King rose and approached him. "I remember riding out one night with a forester, but nothing of return. Did I return alone?"

"Your Majesty returned with the Countess Ilona, escorted by myself, next day at sunset. As I was riding to the castle on my way from Zarilov, with one of the men—the same who accompanied yourself the night before—a tramp of hoofs suddenly startled us, and you thundered across our path at full gallop, followed by the Countess. Your horse fell and threw you, causing that cut on the temple, which she tried to staunch with her hair, and I bound up with a handkerchief. We led your horse with difficulty to the castle, where you showed high fever and grew seriously ill. Then we watched and nursed you through it, and—your Majesty is now restored."

He bowed again, almost sweeping the ground with his cap's white osprey plume ; then, standing erect, awaited the King's commands with a haughtily fascinating grace. Waldemar looked at him fondly, thinking how proud and beautiful was youth like his, a sun no cloud had ever overcast ; then loosed from his own neck the collar of the Lion.

"Take my first recognition of your patience at my sick-bed, and your courage and readiness last night, Vassilio : it shall not be my last."

Andrassy's eyes flashed fire. The highest order in the kingdom ! . . . He sank on his knee, flushing and paling, murmuring words of thanks.

"I wish for devotion, not thanks," said Waldemar, his empty heart's pathetic cry for sympathy escaping.

"You shall have it, sire, from me !" exclaimed Vassilio impetuously, forgetting jealousy. The words locked the fetter of affection for Andrassy already strong upon the King ; the natural result of their close association, Gadatz's favouritism towards the aide-de-camp, the latter's potent personal magnetism, and Waldemar's lonely soul. The King admired in Vassilio the buoyant heart of youth ; its glorious fire undamped, its hope, more glorious, undisappointed. He wished to shield this radiant image of what he might himself have been ; to lavish on it all the gifts of fortune which, to him, seemed futile trifles. He was irresistibly attracted by this sanguine soul which might become his sad soul's brother ; young like him, passionate like him, and capable, he thought, of deep devotion. Vassilio's courage nerved him ; his strong vitality inspired ; his gaiety was like the sun, which carries health and vigour where it shines. As a sick man clings to a strong man's hand whose touch seems pouring vital currents through him, Waldemar obeyed the impulse to attach this brilliant being to himself. Brother-souls, he thought, like those



mysterious brother-suns revolving each round each, one dark, one blazing. Now Vassilio had saved his life : it seemed a sign that this new comradeship was sacred.

"But for your shot, I should be dead to-day," said Waldemar, raising and embracing him: he was warmed to the heart by the other's tone of cordial gratitude. "Nothing could have saved me, the girl in my arms, my bridle entangled, and I without a weapon. Life with me is a duty, Vassilio ; with you it is a pleasure. You saved a life I would gladly lose: join in it and help it on! Sometimes my load is too heavy, the way too long, and I need a comrade's steadfast heart to lean on. Be that beloved comrade! Must I have no friend because I am a king?"

"I am too much honoured, sire," said Vassilio. "How can I thank you for such condescension?"

The King sighed.

"Some day you will learn to speak in other words and in another spirit. I do not condescend: I offer you the living heart of friendship, man to man. Why should simple words of mine become august, because a king's lips speak them? Let me be known by my deeds and not my ermines! Let my truth and rectitude be weighed, and not my crown!"

Waldemar had missed, in Vassilio's second answer, the genuine ring which stirred and moved him in the first. In the minute which intervened between them, Vassilio's supreme delight had soured. The highest order in the kingdom—yes: from the man whom Ilona loved. He felt resentment, almost hatred, in remembering that fortune, rank, advancement, all, must reach him from that hand. But Waldemar's subtle disappointment he divined, and addressed himself promptly to remove it. What! repulse by a thought or a breath the friendship and confidence Fokshany had charged him to use all means to obtain?

"Your Majesty," he said, with his sudden vivid fascinating smile, "if I am not worthy of your friendship and of this great favour now, I will try to be hereafter."

It was afternoon. The King sat gazing across the lake from a seat above the balustrade; Mara crouched, half kneeling, at his feet.

"Lord of our lives, are you angry?" she murmured, fearful of this marble meditation.

"No," said Waldemar slowly. "No, my child," returning her beseeching look. While she watched his face with fervent gratitude's devotion, it resumed its sealed and solemn calm. How could the girl, despite her deep anxiety, divine what passed behind that mask?—what perplexities were struggling for solution; what keenest sense of justice tried to hold the balance fair; what strange impersonal remorse stretched hands to plead for mercy, calling mercy justice? . . . The drama of Vlastimir's life rolled out before him, scene by scene: it was also that of the nation's liberation, full of lofty aims and valiant deeds. The figure of the man who, having fought and bled for freedom, could plan reform and order through the country he had saved, and yet, aware of ignorance, sit humbly down to learn his letters while he ruled, seemed to Waldemar sublime. How many kings, as ignorant of the mightier book of human nature, take the pains to study that beyond the limits of their all-complaisant court? Waldemar remembered hearing, as a child, of the hero's obscure death: Zarilov had rioted, and only been suppressed by troops who charged the crowds with bayonets fixed. He had heard of him vaguely as some dangerous brigand chief, his house's daring foe, and not till when a youth under Gadatz had listened to the whole tale's tragedy. Waldemar stared at the immutable hills, and thought, "My

father ordered it." The patriot was butchered, and his son's best years lived out in exile, for a point of policy.

"Accursed age of trickery and strife!" thought Waldemar. "When all the nations cower and truckle, fearing war, instead of banding in a mighty brotherhood of progress and reciprocation! Kings sell their daughters and their souls for an alliance—plunge their country into bankruptcy to pay for war-material equal to their thrice as rich allies', or force a marriage between cousins whose blood already reeks with inbred madness. Why not an alliance based on Christianity, on the religion all these hypocrites profess?—a Holy Alliance indeed, for peace, not war; for brotherhood, not universal rapine! Were every nation certain of its boundaries, and sure that an attempt to encroach upon its neighbour's would be punished by the Parliament of Peoples as the pickpocket's attempt is punished now, war's motive, plunder, would be gone. Will they never see that peace, to the very core of life, is the only balm for the world's wounds? Peace between nation and nation, peace between labour and capital, peace between market and market, peace between man and man. Useless! No, human nature refuses simplicity because itself is complex to the core; and itself has made modern life's conditions so false, so artificial, that no abuse can be attacked without attacking the whole system. If at least the governors of the world could see the wisdom of placing the nations on a commercial, instead of military, footing, many grave questions would adjust themselves quickly in the light of mutual interest. But men will be slain, and women sacrificed, and nations robbed and ruined, to the end of time. So long as the snake has venom and the lion fangs, humanity will be a leper with eternal sores of folly, suffering, and wrong."

The King's head sank upon his breast.

"Dragon's teeth," he muttered, "dragon's teeth! and those my father sowed are coming up armed men. How can I accept the benefits of murder, yet punish in the injured one the instinct of revenge? Benefits! a curse which loads me down. . . . Let fate decide. My oath has bound me to the nation: I will serve my people as she bade me, do my best. If death comes, better so, and sweet to tired soul as sleep to tired body; but to preserve my life by sacrificing his—No." He spoke the word aloud, head raised again, and steadfast eyes upon the changeless mountains.

"Your Majesty . . ." murmured Mara, troubled, addressing him as Ilona had taught her to. The King, recalled to the present, resumed the interview himself had interrupted.

"Have you told the story of the plot, my child, to anyone besides myself?"

"No, no, your Majesty!" the girl cried, with the instinct of concealment, bred by long oppression, strong.

"Mara," said Waldemar solemnly, "do you think you have the constancy to keep it always secret? Never to let the names of Stroimir and Lazar pass your lips?"

She sprang to her feet, then sank again upon her knee before him, eyes all question.

"If I forgive," said the King, "can you, too, find forgiveness for them?"

"I!—forgive! After all that I suffered!—after he tried to kill me twice—twice!—when I hate them so—!" She stifled with the thousand reasons battling in her heart, each fiercely struggling to be first expressed. "Why," she cried, "why must I forgive them?"

"It is nobler to forgive."

Mara stared at him, frowning, dumb, amazed. She could not comprehend him.

"Mara," said Waldemar, "you have suffered, have you not?" She signed assent most bitterly. "All your suffering was caused by others' cruelty. Would you be cruel too? . . . Let us heal wounds, and not make them. Would you not rather be consoler than avenger? Tell me, little sister, would you rather love or hate?"

He paused. She was distressed, perplexed, and touched, by his last words, to strange emotion.

"I would have loved them all," she cried, "if they had ever let me. Ah, if they had only known how I longed for father's, mother's, sister's love! I would have been faithful as a dog—I was grateful to the dogs themselves because they licked my hand. . . ." She was thinking of Maxim, and the old life of the valley flashed on memory in every homely detail.

"Think of your future," pursued Waldemar, "the home, the husband, children in your arms—love everywhere. Let the dead heart of dead hate rot forgotten: take living love for guide! Have you ever felt so happy, when you thought how you could hate, as when you dreamed how you could love?"

Mara burst into a storm of sobs as sudden as the storms of summer rain which swept the valley. "Maxim, Maxim . . ." she murmured, unnamed desolation in her heart. She thought of him, following fast and faithfully, come too late to help her: of spring so sweet in the valley, and terror hanging over the village; of all the familiar faces, known from childhood, altered with new-born fear. How could it be? She seemed the sport of a dream from which nothing could wake her; events loomed up so huge against her uneventful past. What would he do? Perhaps lurk with the rest in the mountains, hidden like kites or wolves—but no: he would stay with Bosilika, protect his sister to the last. He might die defending the house from those who came to search

. . . !—she had forgotten that . . . ! These terrors had never flashed on her when she was pouring out her accusation: she thought it enough then to name only Lazar and Stroimir, as if the rest would thus become exempt. Now, as if the King's fine soul had waked by contact with its subtler senses in her own, she saw the ruin she was planning, hanging wide as the sky above them all.

"Love is best," said Waldemar, "little sister; love is best."

Another chord in her heart vibrated—that was Sima's creed! All his harmless trivial superstitious lifetime he had preached, half unawares, that glorious sermon. Mara crouched at the feet of the King, humble and penitent.

"I was as wicked as they," she murmured. "Forgive me—I did not mean it. . . ."

Waldemar watched her with pitying eyes, as he did the sad world's wider sorrow.

"You will forgive them, then, my child?"

She took his hand, and covered it with timid, yet passionate caresses, fixing wistful eyes upon his face.

"Teach me to be good, like you," she whispered, sobbing softly still. "She called you 'gracious and merciful'—teach me to be better, dear lord, for you are like St. Jovan whom I always prayed to in the valley. I know I wished for revenge, but if you would not take it, I will drive the thought away. I have been wicked and wild, because I longed for love so bitterly, and no one ever loved me: at last it seemed to turn to hate! I am unworthy to kiss your hand—forgive me, my saviour! I owe my life to you, and I will make it what you wish it!"

"Then you will forgive them, Mara?" said the King.

"I have forgiven them!" she answered.

CHAPTER XIX

BY THE DEVIL STONE

“Qu'est-ce que tout cela fait aux arbres des bois?
Que le peuple ait des jougs et que l'homme ait des rois?
L'eau coule, le vent passe et murmure : Qu'importe !”
VICTOR HUGO.

“**M**ARA! Mara!” shouted Maxim, plunging through the ghostly spaces of the moonlight and the ghostly shadow of the trees. He made a final breathless effort to reach the place from which the cries, now stilled, had come, and almost reeled blind against an oak in his despair on finding Stroimir and Lazar there—alone.

“Where is she?” he demanded fiercely. “What have you done with Mara?” Lazar was cursing, whole mouthsful of devils at once, and Stroimir binding his wrist, mute as death, with a strip of his sash. “What have you done with her?—Mara!” shouted the young man, desperate and furious. . . . He saw the knife on the ground. “Assassins! You have murdered her!”

As he stood in the sickening instant's indecision which follows mighty shocks and crises, Sima came panting and galloping up on the ass, which he kicked and pummelled.

“Murdered!” the Papst howled, rolling off the donkey like a ball, and rushing straight at Lazar. “Thou beast, thou hast done it, then—”

“Beast thyself, Sima!” yelled Lazar. “She has

plunged ten knives into my back, and broken Stroimir's arm, and fled with the Spirit himself—"

"The Spirit?"

"Ay, the Wild Huntsman, though Stroimir says 'twas the cursed Usurper—"

But Sima had plumped on his knees, and was gasping exorcisms and signing crosses madly in the air.

"Then the hoof-beats I heard—" stammered Maxim, drunken with the sudden hope.

"Sima, get up," broke in Stroimir's voice. "We must fly for our lives to the mountains."

"Against the infernal legions," whined Sima, shaking with terror, his eyes on the Devil Stone, "devils, imps, fiends, demons, spirits, vampires, witches, gnomes, and ghouls; goblins, spectres, hell-hounds, werewolves, basilisk, and cockatrice; pixy, fairy, elf, sprite, dragon, nightmare, succubus, chimera—"

"Stop thy cowardly bellowing, Sima!" thundered the indignant Haiduk. "We have men to do with now, not ghosts. If we value our lives, we must take counsel."

"Come out of the forest!" the Papst implored. "What, what! Look at the Devil Stone yonder—the Huntsman may come back!—"

"A plague on thy devils, for once and all!" stormed Stroimir, in a fury. "I tell thee thy bones will pay for thy folly. We will leave thee here, if thou dost not stop."

While Lazar was telling the tale of the battle to Maxim, whose heart at last beat free, the far shout of Jovan was heard, and answered by Stroimir's call of thunder. As for Sima, he darted off in pursuit of the undersized and over-weighted ass, which, too exhausted with its burden to rebel, drooped sad ears and again surrendered.

"Jovan! Hasten!" shouted the Haiduk, making

the forest ring. Mysterious echoes tossed the cry far and near like the villi's voices.

"Coming!" floated back Jovan's answer, in his strong sonorous tones. Then a thud of hoofs, and the Archimandrite rode past the Devil Stone up the glade.

"The girl! Have ye found her?"

"Yes," snarled Lazar.

"Yes," said Stroimir, picking up his knife. "The Usurper himself rode up and bore her off. We must hold a council of war at once, if we want to save our lives. My vote is, Shumo! to the forest! Let us lie hid till the danger is over."

"Ay," the old wolf fretted, "and what will become of my swine and my crops? Ten thousand fiends! Art thou sure it was he, and not the Wild Huntsman, Stroimir?"

"Thou ravest! Thou art infected with devils, like Sima!" growled the Haiduk. "Does the Wild Huntsman use balls of lead that break a wrist like mine?"

"Thou never knowest," cried Sima hurriedly, "what beings of the night can do!—Beware—"

"Ay, well said, when *thou* art safe," sneered Lazar. "She'll swear our lives away, not thine. Well sayest thou Beware!"

"The Usurper! . . ." said Jovan, still mounted, holding the other horses by their bridles. "The Usurper! . . . Do you mean that Mara is escaped?—escaped and gone with *him*?"

"Yes!" answered all. The midnight silence of the forest dropped about them like a pall. Jovan, deadly pale in the moonlight, threw to each man his horse's bridle.

"We are lost!" he said solemnly, at last. "Lazar must hide with thee in the mountains, Stroimir. Guamar and Maxim can carry news between ye and the village, and take some heed of thy stock and fields.

Thou, Sima, must calm the women, and observe the deepest secrecy—”

“But I know not the secret!” cried the Papst, now safely mounted on his ass.

“And I will await the worst, should the True God appoint it, in my Kloster. Nothing can be done but this. Silence—Absence—Secrecy. My vaults are deep, and thy forests thick: we shall meet again—to better purpose. Brethren, farewell! We must part. The Russian agent will leave the Kloster on the day I enter it, and send the secret news of the plot's defeat to our chiefs throughout the country. And now we must disperse to the four winds: the True God bless and keep you all!” He lifted the great gold cross from his breast, which dazzled in the moonlight. “Stroimir, Lazar! pobratimi, brothers in God, farewell, farewell!” They embraced in the saddle; a sigh was heard, and Jovan rode out of the forest.

The rest stood gazing after him past the towering Devil Stone.

“Thou and I must skirt the forest again,” said Lazar to Stroimir, “and I can leave my horse with Bojo, where thou leavest thine. Ten thousand fiends! that I should have to turn Haiduk again when my hair is grey, because of that devil-begotten wench. . . . Thou wilt bring me news of the fields and the cattle, Maxim?” he inquired, pointing a bony finger at his grandson as if in accusation, while his raucous voice grew keen. “At least thou’lt not figure as bridegroom to the gipsy jade when I am gone!” and he turned his horse sharply, with a laugh as ugly as the rattle of dry bones.

“Farewell,” said Stroimir. “Let Miloutim return at once. Guamar may linger a day or two, and search for spies or troops, then join us. Shumo! To the forest!” And the Haiduk, giant on a giant horse, rode off.

It was Sima's turn to stare at the Devil Stone, quaking on his ass's back with terror.

"Think'st thou, Maxim," he quavered, "'twas the Spirit after all?"

"Father Sima," said the young man, "do you think, yourself, that Mara would flee with the fire-eyed Wild Huntsman?"

"Ah," said the Papst, glancing fearfully about, "who knows but he seemed a lovely youth while he enticed her? Would we were out of this forest, Maxim! Would that we were safely home in bed. Were even the Popadia here, I should be easier, for though but merely woman, she hath a sturdy soul. At least the maid is safe away—if *'twas* the King—" his doubt was in his accent. "And yet, what threatens Lazar and the Haiduk?—plots, I fear; deep, deadly plots. . . . Wherever we mix with the world's bemuddled stream, my son, is strife and sin. Better the valley than a court; the quiet, useful plough than any crown. Better honest friends than flatterers, and peace than mighty monarch's hugest gem! What, what! let us pray for calm and concord, love and blessed harmony. . . . And, Maxim, if I ever see my house again alive, this grisly night once past, I vow to live and die within the valley!"

The Papst invoked Heaven with his arms on high, while Maxim turned the little ass about.

"Amen, Father Sima," he said, with a sense of both relief and loss. Duty pointed him back to the valley; love, to the lake Lasnitza. At least she had reached the friend she sought—no robber or wolf had seized her—and Maxim remembered, jealousy aroused, how she had called him merciful and gracious. . . . But the dread consequences—her revenge! . . . No matter. Courage and duty, the watchword of the Haiduks' valiant band, sustained him. Stroimir, Lazar, and Jovan would be safe; his life and Guamar's

were less precious. He would defend his home and sister to the death, and, if all went well, could later go into the world and seek for Mara. He shuddered strongly as he glanced about, remembering her cries: he knew that they had tried to murder her. . . . "Amen, Father Sima," he repeated, thanksgiving in his heart, the future brighter in the light of mercies past. His stalwart figure, reverently leading the donkey by the bridle, with the Papst upon its back, set forward anew into the forest.

. . . They were gone. The moon was setting, and the huge trunks cloaked in shadow. The heart of night and the forest's heart were tranquil in primordial silence.

CHAPTER XX

ON THE WING

"Qu'on serait heureux si les cœurs
Étaient faits les uns pour les autres."

ARQUET DE VOLTAIRE.

ANOTHER dawn upon the lake: the last of that year's summer which Ilona would watch there. The court was on the eve of its return to Zarilov: the King had declared his health restored. Ilona drew the swaying sprays of honeysuckle nearer, remembering that Waldemar had touched them; she remembered, too, how his hand had loosed the flowers, as if relinquishing the sweeter flowers of life, when he said, "I ride to escape from madness . . ." sombrely gazing at the mountains. Would he come, this time—the last? It was late; wide morning silver on the waters. All earth breathed incense to the spring, and every dewdrop gleamed a fairy diamond.

With the double vitality of youth and love, Ilona still envied the season's vital vigour. The whole earth harmony, development, and love; but her own soul all discord, repression, and hatred. . . . There were times when she hated Waldemar as a woman hates the jewel she desires to possess, when it dazzles in the bosom of another. Her strong soul, goaded to blindness, sometimes wished for its idol's destruction, as pagan devotees have struck the marble god who would not listen to their prayer. Her passion was

more galling, being self-evoked: its consequence, humiliation. Had the King given life to it by even a look, she might have accused him of neglect, of fickleness, but not of that supreme offence, indifference. He would have been both loved and hated less.

"And so we are leaving Königslust!" cried a voice as fresh as the birds'. Vassilio came towards her, all spring's buoyancy in his bounding step.

She turned. Not Waldemar, and yet the last time they could come to feed the thrushes—! Cruel. . . . She was reckless. She would make the other suffer. She answered him with a beguiling smile.

"Which do you like best?" he pursued, his eager eyes upon her.

"Whichever pleases me most for the moment!" she pouted perversely. "And you?"

"Whichever pleases you most for the moment—for then you are kinder to me."

"No," said Ilona, full of malice. "Zarilov pleases you best, because there you have a city ready to amuse you, while here—there is a woman who cares only to amuse herself."

"If I could have the fortune to amuse her!"

"You? Perhaps you do, sometimes!"

There was a duel of glances: hers, mutinous, perverse, keen, arrowy, and laughing; his, fiery yet full of half appeal, half jest.

"A demon's tongue with an angel's face, is woman," laughed Vassilio.

"And man? Inconstant to kind constancy, but slave to fickleness! Well, men are never perfect, but there are some one can pardon and some one can not."

"Which am I?" he asked, eyes flashing.

"Why should I tell you? If I said one thing, you would grow too vain, and if I said the other, far too sullen."

"Then you like me to be gay?" laughed Andrassy, leaning low on the broad balustrade, with upward glances, where she stood against a bank of honey-suckle tossing creamy clusters.

"I like now this, now that," she answered, "never one thing long. The only things I always love are daring and ambition."

"Ambition! . . ." repeated Vassilio, like an echo. The word came sounding in his ears as a sudden trumpet starts awake a sleeping soldier. "Ambition!" he exclaimed, eyes keen and shining. "I had never thought of that. . . ."

Ilona glanced at him, surprised at his tone's dead earnest following his earlier amorous banter. Her first surprise was swallowed in a second: that expression on his face made him strangely like Fokshany.

"I wonder whether there is any story there . . ." she thought vaguely, without taking much heed of the impression. "A man, and young!" she cried, "and yet you never thought about ambition? Had I been born a boy, there is no height I would not scale and conquer!"

Vassilio had sprung erect, no longer lounging on the balustrade. His eyes were bright as Lasnitz's waters where they glittered below the risen sun. This was a channel for his restless energy, an aim besides mere pleasure: his volatile and haughty nature seized upon the thought with eager zest. A novelty—perhaps a way to gain her interest, which, too imperious to despair of, he was too acute to hope he had as yet obtained. The King his friend, Fokshany his patron, what might he not aspire to? He had not the faintest fear of failure, inspired as he was with youth's superb self-confidence. Besides, the agitation of his obstinate pursuit of Ilona, perpetually baffled, made him welcome eagerly another interest

which, relaxing present tension, might later aid him on. Love, with him, had in the past meant pleasure; now, more exacting, it was passion. Flattered by nature and folly, he had boasted that no woman he desired could resist him; but Ilona had taught him, if not humility, the wisdom of diminished vanity. He felt, regarding her, the prick of pride beside the goad of passion. Her indifference had changed a fickle fancy into the hunter's rage of pursuit: his barbarian blood was high, and she seemed to him half prize, half woman. Daring? ambition? He would dare and scheme enough, if that might help him reach her! Thoughtless and impetuous, the word Ambition rang like music in his ears.

"I never thought of it in that way!" he exclaimed. "It must be glorious to succeed!"

Ilona smiled, with a glance which was half ridicule and half compassion. What a handsome boy he was; and, with all his cleverness, how little versed in life! She was wrong: he could have balanced the chances for another, but his brilliant egotism did not permit his even glimpsing less than triumph for himself. Meanwhile his eyes flashed from the far horizon of the lake, sought instinctively as wider views of life had burst upon him, to her face.

"What will *you* say to me then?" he murmured, in a tone which coaxed, commanded, and caressed.

She laughed.

"Some folly which you will find bewitching, and the rest will think adorable, of course!"

He paled. Her eyes were steady as an eagle's, though one lost his glance in their violet depths. . . . Unmerciful, invincible, invulnerable! From what granite breasts of rugged earth did Eve suck the intolerance of woman for the unloved lover? . . . Vassilio trembled, fixing his heavy-lidded eyes upon her with a passion whose intensity was almost menace.

"Will you never say—"

She interrupted him.

"Anything you wish me to? No, never. I only say what I please, and never what I ought to say to please another. Admit that I am free from all the sweet hypocrisies of woman!" And she slanted a roguish glance at him, as full of coquetry as one of Phryne's.

"You are as cruel as a cat," said Andrassy, who abhorred them, losing his head entirely. "You drive a man mad, and then laugh at him! You—" he checked himself, remembering Fokshany's maxim, "Silence," and dropped on his knee with a smile more winning than any love but this had ever taught him. "You are too angelic," he concluded, "not to say you pardon me, and let me kiss your hand."

She smiled, in banter which was touched with weariness: his fiery kiss, for her, might have been ice.

"On condition that you, too, become angelic, and only talk of extramundane things. Even those, for the present, tire me, so you must go—that is your penance."

"But—" exclaimed Vassilio.

"But! Do I hear of mutiny?" laughed Ilona. She did not know that the mere ripple of her hair above the ear, as it flowed to its comb, tormented him; the mere touch of her hand, so cool, left his lips scorched dry as after flame, not flesh.

"Yes," he answered, "mutiny—but against fate, not you. . . . If you command me . . . I will go."

She smiled, lightly waved her hand, and turned away. He went, with long looks backward, but she never turned her head. His face, at last, seemed aged with passion.

Ilona leaned on the marble balustrade, alone. Vassilio was gone, the King not coming. A phrase

rang in her ears, like odious music: "The last morning—the last morning!" Everything had deceived her, then: the sun, which sprang so glad from the sea; the birds, which sang so sweet of love; the flowers, which bloomed for his hand to take; the King himself, who said good-night to her so kindly. . . .

"Why does he, and not Waldemar, love me?" she thought, with woman's cruel lack of logic in the realms of love and hate—her face convulsed with rage—"when I would give his life to please the other!"

Half an hour passed, the peaceful sky above, the peaceful lake below, the peaceful garden round her. All placid but the wrestling human heart, which once even Eden could not satisfy. Ilona stirred at last; a thought, beyond the current of her own, had stopped her stormy reverie.

"If there is a mystery about him, Dobrinjaz, who hates Fokshany, will find it out. I will speak to him when we meet in Zarilov. . . . The last morning—the last morning! yet he has not come. . . ."

CHAPTER XXI

SORCERY

“What devil was’t
That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?”
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

IT was the Eve of St. Jovan, the vigil of the longest day. Once, throughout Europe, the zenith of the year was celebrated with fire: on the hill-crests faggots blazed, flaming to heaven; in the valleys tossed torches like will-o'-the-wisps. But the Council of Nuremberg denounced the wild-fires which flashed from mountain to mountain, forbidding them in 1658 as “an old heathenish bad custom, a superstitious heathenish work.” But Alberia, sunken in Moslem subjection, heard nothing of council or mandate, and still the mountains spoke, summit to summit, with flame-tongues as of old. So great is the Feast of St. Jovan deemed, that the sun is said to thrice stand still in reverence. The toil of the year is over, and its harvesting begun. Another custom, born of Turkish tyranny, remained: that of flocking to the secret sanctuaries in the mountain forests for confession. On certain days, the district round a kloster would gather to the sacred place in crowds, many camping overnight about the walls, each party round a fire. Maxim and Guamar joined the village pilgrims, with Loubitza and Bosilika, arriving at the Kloster Sokol on the night before St. Jovan's Eve. The young men were excited with the thought of an

impending meeting—that of the three heads of the defeated plot, Stroimir, Lazar, and Jovan, Archimandrite of the Kloster.

“Miloutim, too, will come with them, and join in the sports,” said Guamar, with a sigh. The singer’s loyalty to Stroimir was in endless warfare with his hate of Miloutim, and passion for Bosilika. The failure of the plot had filled his days with wild hopes, and his nights with wilder dreams: perhaps all would end in a mighty crash of ruin and discovery. . . . Then, though he himself might be destroyed, Miloutim would also perish. Bosilika would be unbetrothed, unwedded, still his own through love and death.

“Yes,” answered Maxim, throwing his arm round the neck of his bond-brother, “he will be there.” He did not say, as he had done before the Stone of Marko, “It is thou alone whom she loves.” Since the plot’s frustration, Guamar had been constantly in the valley, aiding Maxim with the fields and cattle, singing to his gusle when the long day’s work was done. Loubitza willing, they had called the lads and girls to dance the kolo in the moonlight, to the sound of the love-song, more flexible and flowing than the nobler heroic lay. But Bosilika had grown gentler, less careless and roguish, than before: she had almost ceased to inquire for Miloutim, a former favourite way of hers of subtly torturing Guamar.

“Thou’st growing a good girl about the house,” Loubitza said, one day when in a better humour than was usual. “Thou’rt less for freaks, pranks, and vagaries, and not so wayward as before. Thy man, when thou weddest, will have less trouble a-beating thee than I thought for.”

Bosilika blushed, for Guamar had heard, and thrown a look of merry menace at her. He also had noticed she mended and milked more patiently than usual, tangling less often the flax in her distaff, from which



she now diligently spun. Maxim, seeing this shrinking mood, ascribed it to her fears for Miloutim, and her seldom speaking of him to the bashfulness of maiden love. Guamar was wiser: he knew her softness was the first-born child of love, but love, for the poet, not the clod, and fragrant as the flowers for the sun. This was why Guamar ever hated the idea of the possible betrothal more; and why honest Maxim, unversed in arts of woman, did not say, "It is thou alone whom she loves."

Maxim had done his duty since the fruit-bloom fell in May; he had sentinelled his sister and the homestead like a watch-dog, and been wary as the giant guardian mastiffs at the door. But in spite of the terror of Sima, who looked every night to be executed in his bed, as well as the Popadia; and the deep uneasiness of Maxim and the singer, ever watching for some bloody invasion or surprise, at least for lurking spies, the valley's life had glided past for seven weeks untroubled.

"The Usurper is biding his time," was Stroimir's grim comment when Guamar brought them news of calm unbroken after three weeks had passed since the Feast of the Kralize. Another month went by, and even Lazar, suspicious as a sleuth-hound, was compelled to believe that Mara had never told the secret to the King—perhaps would never tell it.

"Besides," said Jovan, in secret conclave with the Haiduk and the herdsman, "Leonti writes me, in cipher known to us alone, that not a rumour has been heard in Zarilov. Had the King known, he would have consulted with Fokshany, and that would have been death to all they laid their bloody hands on. No!" cried the Archimandrite, rising, and pacing up and down the stone room where his sonorous voice resounded, "no, the secret is untold—we can go on without a fear. Let us drink to the future, brothers!"

He lifted a drinking-cup high, and they drank the zdravitza deep in the Kloster wine, prepared by the secret spell of a vila, who taught it to an archimandrite of the mystic past.

Meanwhile the fires of the pilgrims were burning, a girdle of flame round the Kloster; and, far in the dome of the night sky, fires answered, inscrutable torches, the stars. What plan were they carrying out, the worshippers' fires, so feeble and transient? What scheme were they forwarding, there in eternal procession, the wonderful beacons of night? Mystery! Deep as the grave's, the riddle of man's strange instinct of worship; the enigma of God, still hidden, to whom rose the flame of the fires and the stars.

It was near midnight. The flames had sunk to embers. Sleep had stolen over the pilgrim bands. Maxim lay on his side, both hands at the pistols in his sash. Loubitza snored and rolled: she did not like the ground to lie on; although, for her and Bosilika, Maxim and Guamar had spread a couch of twigs, grass, leaves, and flowers. The singer lay gazing up at the stars, his arm behind his head: it was his habit in the lonely forest nights to lie thus face to face with heaven. Suddenly, just as the great red moon was rising like a copper shield behind the mountain, Bosilika lifted herself on her arm, paused, watched, then gained her feet, and glided off towards the Kloster. In a second Guamar was up, and, silently following, overtook her.

"Thou?" cried the girl, as his hand fell light but quivering on her shoulder.

"I," said the singer, low. "Where art thou going at dead of night? Whom—art—" he paused.

"Do not hinder me, Guamar," she whispered. "The time is very short. Thou canst come with me to the gate where the girls await me, but no farther.



The rest of the way I must go alone—" she shuddered, "or the spell is broken."

"What spell?" asked the Haiduk, breathing freer. He had thought confusedly of Miloutim.

"A spell that Sima's mother taught us, the Jovan's Eve before she died. Thou knowest she was a witch: it was she who cured Mara when Grandfather struck her with his spade, and she who advised Father Sima to set up the bullock-skulls in his garden."

"But what is the spell for?" asked Guamar, perplexed. They were picking their way through the sleeping camps. The moon, now clear of the mountain, glared dull and fierce like a great red eye. "What is it for?" asked the young man. "What dost thou want it for, Bosa?" He took her hand as he spoke, and Bosilika, silent, blushed in the dark. A moment later they reached the gate of the Kloster's cemetery. Several figures were whispering there: the girls who had attended Queen Kralize in the procession.

"Thou art late by the stars," murmured one, coming forward.

"What!" cried another. "The bridegroom beside thee already? Couldst thou not wait for what thou wilt see when thou art in the graveyard?"

"Ah!" croaked she who had lost her chance with the dwarf through Bosilika's rage and the raven's, "who knows but thou wilt not see the wedding-party, and the bridegroom, and the maidens, and the bridesmen, all so gay, but only thy sheeted coffin borne on the shoulders of the headless shadows!"

Bosilika trembled. "No, no!" she gasped. Guamar threw his arm about her, or she would have fallen.

"Raven! screech-owl!" said the singer fiercely. "Keep thine accursed omens to thyself!—Come, Bosa, come, return; this is no place nor errand for thee!"

"No, Guamar," answered Bosilika, breathing quickly, for her heart beat fast and thick. "No; I have already laid the branch upon the tomb, and I must go and fetch it."

"Perhaps thou wilt see no spectres," said the boding one, "but only have bad dreams. She who is to die unwed, the mother of Sima told me, will see nothing unless love itself is to bring her to her end, but she will dream of yawning tombs and new-made graves, of winding-sheets and vampires, of the ghosts of dead brides who dance by moonlight at the cross-roads, and of rings which fit no finger or crumble into dust."

There was dead silence: each girl held her breath. The screech-owl was heard in the forest.

"I will not let thee go," said Guamar. Bosilika started like a hunted hare.

"Yes, thou must!" she cried. "The monks will begin their chant at midnight, and the hour is come. I must go to fetch my branch, and be there by the tomb when they begin, and learn my fate. Do not follow. I must go—I will!"

She sprang from his hold through the gate into the graveyard. The red moon showed her figure dim and fleeting as a ghost's.

"The True God be with her!" muttered Guamar fervently. "Who has set her to this witchcraft?" he pursued.

"Not I!—nor I!—nor we!" cried the maidens.

"She loves a youth," said the boding one, "and longs to know if he will wed her."

The singer was silent: he strained his gaze across the graveyard to the far tomb of an ancient king, he who had founded the Kloster, and whose bones lay quiet in its shadow through the centuries of strife. It was for himself she dared the dead and tried the spell; to see whether he or Miloutim should conquer.

. . . Guamar remembered the curse of the Vila, which fated him to a tragic death.

The monks began to chant within the Kloster.

The girls pressed nearer together, like frightened fowls, as the solemn voices rose. The moon, a ball of lurid fire, seemed to watch above the mountain shoulder. The music rolled aloft, in volumes of harmonious invocation, as if it denounced to the True God the incantation muttered at the tomb. Guamar vainly gazed and gazed across the graveyard to the shadow of the royal monument. Where was she gone? What beings of the weirder world of night were with her? What fate was she divining for them both? Would love be kind as death was destined cruel? . . . Guamar started. A shriek! Again! . . . And then—the solemn chanting in the Kloster.

The girls seized each other by the hands or garments, and fled, deaf, dumb, and blind with terror. Guamar dashed into the graveyard, stumbling wildly on across the tombs. "Bosa!" he shouted. "Bosa! Bosa! Where art thou, where art thou, Bosa?" But the moon and the graves were mute, and the voices of the monks alone pealed out upon the silence.

The monument! She lay beside it—senseless, breathless, a branch of yew in her hand. He flung himself on his knees before her, caught her in his arms, and laid her head against his breast, warmed her cold lips with kisses, called her back by every name of love.

"What ails thee, Bosa? Thou'rt safe, warm in thy nest here, dove of my heart! Wake, sweet! Cling to me: I am strong enough to beard even Szargol for thee! What hast thou seen? Speak—never tremble so, when arms of mine are round thee! Speak—never fear—"

She caught him by his hands, his hair, and shook

with spasms of terror. "Thou—thou! alive, not dead—not dead! . . . Guamar, I saw you fighting on the brink of that great precipice above the Lom, and he seemed to drive thee nearer—nearer—nearer—till you grappled and went headlong down together! . . ."

. . . The Haiduk shuddered: she had swooned again. A fatal omen for himself and her! The chant in the Kloster ceased: night, silence, terror, everywhere. . . . He cast an awestruck glance about him, caught her in his arms, and carried her beyond the place of tombs.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM

"In like manner view also the other epochs of time and of whole nations, and see how many after great efforts soon fell and were resolved into the elements. . . . Everything is only for a day, both that which remembers and that which is remembered. . . . And consider this which surrounds thee, this boundless abyss of the past and of the future in which all things disappear."—MARCUS AURELIUS.

MIDSUMMER Day in Zarilov: the longest day of summer and the year, and the King's birthday. Waldemar had often wondered, as a boy, why his birthday fell upon the summer's splendid noon, when, instead of being pageanted and feasted, he longed to be away in flowery field and shady forest. Now he suppressed the weariness he felt of the conventional preparations in his honour, and the popular enthusiasm which any other prince and holiday would have aroused as well. The stereotyped felicitations; the soulless boom of the royal salute, gun after gun, which shook the windows; the telegrams from foreign royalty and from the members of his royal house; the city gay with banners; the solemn service at the Greek Church, with its conspicuous and curious spire, brown and gold; the afternoon's review; the evening's gala performance at the theatre, followed by a ball. . . . The King woke with the dead weight of the day to come upon him, with its host of hollow ceremonies, bald observances, formality, etiquette, punctilio, and pageant. He had no longer beside him her face whose smile

made weariness itself seem gay ; besides, Gadatz was ailing, and Waldemar oppressed with presage of another loss. . . . The felicitations, choral service, and review of troops, at least, were over : the King was passing to his own apartments, thinking of an hour's repose. The heat was less oppressive than during the review, as a brief but violent thunderstorm had cleared the air and laid the dust—a boon which almost every day cooled parching Zarilov. As Waldemar passed down the corridor, Karaman paused at a portière which veiled a door ajar to catch the fresh breeze, pushed his huge head under, and stalked in.

“Karaman !” called the King.

“He is here, your Majesty !” cried Mara, leading him out by the collar. “He came to play with me, so please forgive him !”

“Is the Countess within ?” asked Waldemar, smiling at the girl's anxiety.

“She is on the terrace : shall I call her, sire ?”

“Yes, my child ; but first tell me, are you happy ?”

The King pushed back the hangings, entered, and sat down. The cool rose-scented twilight of the room stole soothingly upon his tired senses. He drew a long breath of fatigue and relief, and mused upon the subtleties of woman's influence. They, he thought, alone know the spells and secrets of refinement and repose. . . . He roused himself, recalling Mara, and then smiled. She had sunk on her knee before him, and Karaman, as tall as she, sat up beside her ; both were watching him, the dog's ears pricked, the girl's soft lips apart with eagerness. . . . This innocent worship and attendance touched the King : there was a kinship of nature and simplicity between the huge brute, with his vigilant and dignified fidelity, and Mara, whose ingenuous devotion was the fruit of her untutored youth.

"My child," said Waldemar kindly, "I have seen too little of you lately. Tell me, are you happy? How has it been with you?"

"Let me kiss my preserver's hand on his birthday," Mara murmured, with lowered eyes. "Yesterday I went off to the woods, and gathered an armful of flowers, all the flowers of fortune and happiness, hoping to offer them to him. But the heat was so fierce that they faded, and I have nothing to offer now. . . ."

Waldemar, with the swift intuition of sorrow, heard tears in her voice.

"Mara," he said, "little sister, something troubles you. What is it?"

Mara shrank and trembled. She dared not ask the King to reconsider what Ilona had told her was his wish about her future. If he commanded her to wed the Papst Leonti, it was surely because, in his gracious loving-kindness, he believed it best for her to do so. Besides, it was her duty to obey him to the death, since he had saved her life. . . . She thought of Maxim pressing up too late, with her name on his lips, to help her; then put her arms round the neck of Karaman, remembering the mastiffs which had loved her, and fell weeping.

"Mara—"

"Mara!"

The King looked up, twice startled: Ilona stood in the doorway.

"Why are you crying?" the Countess asked, with womanly solicitude. Then, "King Waldemar . . ." she murmured, blushing as their eyes met, with an accent of modest deprecation, and bending tenderly above the girl as if she were some favourite sister. "Come, you are tired from the heat, but you must not show it, Mara, and distress the King when he does us the honour of a visit, and especially upon his

birthday." She spoke simply and quietly, as if to soothe a child, then added, "Dry your eyes, and go and order in the slatko."

Mara turned, kissed the King's hand passionately, and left the room.

"She is homesick for the mountains and the fields," said Ilona. "It will pass away in time; she is too young to be sad for long. It needs more years and griefs than hers to teach us what is sadness."

"Yes," said Waldemar, sighing. Ilona flattered him with subtle hints of sympathy which transiently relaxed his sorrow's discipline. She pricked the wound in order to apply a sweeter balm, with a sentiment half perfidy, half adoration. Some day he would recognise her healing touch, and come to lay the noble head she loved upon her bosom. The King himself, though sceptic, by experience, of good faith in others, had a fatal and pathetic trait: that of trusting wholly, where he placed his trust, until betrayed as wholly.

"You are very good to the girl," said Waldemar. "She ought to be happy in your care."

Ilona's heart leaped. So her feigned solicitude had masked her jealousy. She had succeeded in impressing him, as she had wished to, with her womanly and gentle care. She counted every card in the game as a gambler does whose stake is life or ruin; the slightest advantages were prized, the least important aid accepted.

"I am very proud to know you think I have done as you wished, King Waldemar. When you brought her to me, I determined to fulfil your trust devotedly."

The King was about to answer, when a chamberlain and footmen entered with the slatko. A crystal dish contained the curious preserve of unripe nuts or fruit; beside which, on the broad gold salver, stood a

golden basket, divided in the centre by a filigree partition, one side of which held spoons. The service was presented to the King, but he motioned it away to Ilona: it was one of his foibles to dislike, as a gentleman, being helped, as a king, before a lady. Ilona bowed in soft confusion, took a spoonful of the sweetmeat, and then laid the spoon in the empty division of the basket; a glass of iced water was offered, which she held and sipped until the service was completed.

"How came you to think of slatko, as if I had been a formal visitor?" smiled Waldemar. "It is nectar and ambrosia in this heat."

"Because I always think about your comfort. Remember, I was once your nurse, King Waldemar," she answered. "I know how ceremonial wearies you, and here you must find, to-day at least, a little oasis in the desert."

"I do," said the King, recalled to duty, and remembering the performance still to drag its length away, besides the ball which he must open with the black-mustachioed cat-eyed wife of the Russian Minister.

Tiny cups of sweetened Turkish coffee were brought in, as usual, following the slatko; and the King was regaining the impression of repose and ease which had soothed him upon entering the room, when a chamberlain announced Andrassy.

"The Gospodar ventured to wait upon His Majesty, on hearing of his being here, as he has just left Doctor Gadatz, who is extremely indisposed."

Waldemar sprang up, forgetting Mara, about whose tears and absence he was wishing to inquire; and, saying farewell to Ilona, hurried, much disturbed, to join Vassilio. Ilona set her teeth, cursed Gadatz and Andrassy, and went to the balcony, which gave upon the chief square of the city, and below which passed the sunset promenade. The façade of the Konak, or

palace, formed one side of it, while opposite stretched from the heights an open view across the meeting of the Danube and the Save into the plains of Hungary. To the right lay a park where wood and path and garden invited all who wished to rest or ramble, and which was the rendezvous where all the world went by, proceeding down the chief street of the town, which passed the Konak. To-day the promenade was especially crowded, the procession unusually gay. Young officers, well built and dashing; and the older, bearded, martial, and impressive. The ladies, in every colour, tightly laced, some wearing their dresses of the French style awkwardly, and some with special grace, while great flower-strewn hats, according to the latest Vienna fashion, and trimmed with the incomparable artificial flowers of the Austrian capital, completed their toilet. Others, chiefly older women, wore the Alberian town-costume, moving slowly in their ample skirts, bell sleeves, and braided Turkish jackets; while their parasols protected heads whose long dark hair, wound round its fez or richer shield of pearls, was its only covering. Priests and monks of different degrees passed with the swaying gait which marks men who have long worn flowing garments; picturesque figures, whose black robes showed sometimes linings of purple or magenta. They proceeded, in stately twos or threes, wide-sleeved, with embroidered girdles and tall kalpaks, an air of calm dominion about them more assured than that of the most boastful soldier. The children flew to the bread-vendors who lounged or squatted in the square or by the park beneath a tree; from which ragged and unpleasant sources the ladies bought them crescent cakes or half-ripe plums, a cooling Turkish drink, or a glass of sweetened water. A girl or two went by, in the gay peasant dress of the district of Zarilov, a rose set in their hair, or, if their charms

were on the wane, less fresh and simple ornaments of beads or coins. Soldiers passed in blue, King's Guards in blue and red; the swords of the officers clanked with arrogant emphasis along the stones; the uniforms were handsome, and the older men, in memory of campaigns against the Turks, wore decorations on their breasts. Sometimes a peasant, in the thong-bound leggings, with knee-breeches, quilted or embroidered jacket, scarf-belt and fez, of his order, went by, his wife beside him carrying a duck by the feet, or a basket of household purchases. Nurses were seen, of the Viennese type, dressed in glowing colours, with the child they carry bound about them in a long white shawl; manlike, with short skirts and high boots to the knee, pacing along like soldiers. Urchins, in one tattered garment yellowish with use, whose copper-tinted skins and glorious eyes and mendicant monologue marked them Bohemians, came begging with beseeching palm outstretched. A labourer or two, in dirty tunics reaching to the knee, white trousers, heelless shoes whose toes are hoods of plaited leather, coloured girdles now no longer full of arms, and felt caps like an English ploughboy's, gazed about in stupid wonder at the rest. By chance a turbaned Turk passed; ghost, perhaps, of the now-vanquished tyranny.

Ilona received a hundred salutations as she leaned upon her balcony and watched the passing crowd. There was Arseni, gone back to the dark girl who loved him, in order to pique Ilona if he could; the Baroness followed, in Alberian town-costume, which made her look sedate and stout and shapeless. The General, with pompous clink of spurs and spread of orders, cast a glance gallant and melting up at his "ideal of woman"; Fokshany passed slowly, next the Metropolitan with his heavy gold chain from which depended a Greek cross, his golden shoe-

buckles and purple velvet kalpak, holy book and ring, and venerable beard, a prelate whose iron-bound conservatism the Premier found congenial; behind them, in attendance, with snake-eyed Stojan the arch-priest, his superior, came Leonti. A smooth pale face, with all the beauty of regular features and level brows; narrow voluptuous eyes, which had a trick of glancing sidewise and down; soft white hands whose characteristic was a special suppleness; and the long hair and beard of the Greek priesthood. Ilona received his salute, sedate but marked, with satisfaction.

"She will obey; and then I have told him that the King will dower her, and promised him court interest and advancement. . . . The Greek is subtle and ambitious. She will soon be out of my sight—and Waldemar's!"

Meanwhile the Papst paced on, continuing a pious debate upon a point of doctrine, and thinking, behind his placid mask, "A dowry and court favour, besides a handsome wife; the King's own notice fixed upon me; future honours. . . . Surely better than my humble post in the inferior priesthood, and the thankless fate of tool to plots for others' profits!"

Ilona hung above the crowded square, in her rich embroidered house-dress, like a bird of paradise; the sun was going down. The promenade's tide had begun to turn, and was setting back to the city; the blue and green waters of the Danube and the Save were mingled in a stream of shining gold. She turned and went through the tall French windows into the room beyond. Gadatz was dying: that would break another link with the past, and force the King more surely near her; Mara would be married to the Papst and no longer preoccupy his generous heart. Vassilio she did not fear.

"He loves myself too blindly: he will feel jealousy

where Waldemar desires devotion. Their natures are too opposite for true accord, . . . though the King will never know it, for he thinks the other's mere adaptability is sympathy. Besides, I read him clear: Andrassy will be tool, but never master." A strong emotion shook her at the word, and stirred her to the softest depths of her barbaric heart, beneath its panoply of pride and passion. "Master!" she murmured. "Waldemar, master of mine as no other ever has been or can be! A glance of his has quelled me when I could have killed him for his coldness—for talking on in his gracious way, without a thought of the load of love my heart was breaking under, as if Love's self had died with Fredegonde. . . ." A spasm of fury seized her, followed by a sense of stinging shame. "Why am I so wicked? Sometimes I could see him die, to know that he would never think again of her. . . . But if he loved me—I! I would change my very soul, and be an angel there beside him. Oh, I would guide him upward, help him on, love truth and good because he loves them! If I had his love, it would teach me to pity, heal, and aid, to make my world a heaven: I should be gentle and unselfish, quick to hear and help as Christ's sweet mother. If he loved me—if he loved—" she sank upon her knees before the Ikon, fast-clasped hands stretched upwards, and burst into a passion of tears.

The sun was down, and the mehanas (eating-houses) and hotels were filling with men about to dine. They came in pairs and parties, most of them unaccompanied by ladies. This is a result of what is practically the survival of the seraglio system: the women remain in their homes, where they visit one another; the men meet at the cafés, dine and drink together, jest, carouse, talk politics, discuss the interests of their active life, and sing, over their relays of

alternate wine and coffee, the curious music of their land. Minor music, sometimes without time or tune, sometimes changing time each bar or two, where one distinctive phrase is repeated again and again with different words, and haunts the song; it has something of the bagpipe music's monotony, but, while equally characteristic of its nation, is less wild and more poetic. Its harmonies and cadences are novel to ears used to scientific compositions, and have a rude affinity with nature in her phases of melancholy, joy, or wrath. Here the people's long hope and endurance under the Moslem tyranny is voiced; there are wistful endings on the third or sixth, which seem like pauses full of expectation. The tables, lit by candles in adjustable glass-shades, were set under the trees before the house or in the courtyard, or thickly in the barn-like *café-chantants*, where, on one side of the hall, was a small orchestra and stage. Papsts mixed with the profaner crowds, and ate the curious foods provided: *gefüllte papricash*, or great green peppers stuffed with something sausage-like; *shabab*, a spit full of morsels of meat with a flavour of fried onions; *tchulbastia*, a dish of meat surrounded in the Turkish manner with boiled rice; *sterlet* fresh from the Danube, served with one of those piquant sauces which are the pride of Moslem cookery: while on the stage a singer in a huge false nose burlesqued the Viennese Jew; a professor of drum-playing, adorned with many medals, kept fourteen drums at once at his sticks' ends, and showed what an incredible deal of energy and deftness can be wholly wasted; or a dark-haired Alberian girl sang the *Song of the Soft Heart*, a thrilling minor refrain full of hope and melancholy. . . . Meanwhile the moon came up, and shed its deathly-peaceful rays on the white city, showing the wide streets, old trees, white houses, fountains round which gather in the daytime

Eastern groups, infrequent monuments, and grim old Turkish fortress hugging fast the hill, as if in days gone by forever. At the theatre, hung with Alberian peasant-women's woven stuffs in gold and scarlet, they were representing, as usual, a striking episode in the country's history, correct in every archæological detail of costume and scenery. The theatre, a handsome white edifice, was lit by its private gasometer, a neighbouring mosque, from which, at the petition of their one-time lord, the Alberians removed the minaret or sacred portion. To-night the theme was Czar Lazar on the eve of Kossovo; the Patriot-emperor, grieved by the jealousy and strife amongst his greatest vassals; by the hatred between his sons-in-law, Vouk Brankovich, the vain patrician, and Milosh Obilich, less nobly born but truly noble-hearted; by the wavering of those who ought to have been firm, and the absence of those who should have joined him. The Turk was already mighty in Europe, and ready for fresh conquest, plunging deep his vulture beak in the Byzantine Empire's carcass; and when a traitor revealed the efforts of Lazar to league the Christian princes in a band to break the Moslem power, Murad, the Sultan, gathered his whole might of arms and marched upon Alberia. No time to organise a strong defence; no time for reinforcements to approach from Hungary, Bulgaria, and Greece; only the twenty thousand men of Bosnia's king and John Castriote's Albanians rallied to the army of Lazar, where many of the most important standards were absent, called too late, or, worse, gone over to the foe.

The scenes of the tragedy passed, with their onward march, to the inevitable end. Hot jealousy between Lazar's daughters, sitting with the Empress at the castle casement, as they watched the Czar riding with Milosh and Brankovich, equally handsome and

stately. "Nobly born was Vouk's¹ mother, and humbly born was the mother of Milosh,² and lowly, on mare's milk, she reared him : but that mare could leap over ten wolves, and crush out their fangs with her strong hoofs." Then a blow between sister and sister ; and when the three horsemen returned, there were two wives to lead off the chargers, but no one to meet Milosh Obilich. He saw his wife in the garden, weeping, the scratch of a gem on her soft cheek ; and, hearing her story, rushed windlike out on Vouk Brankovich, whom he flung to the earth. Czar Lazar calmed them, but Milosh had broken two teeth of the Brankovich ! Thenceforth hate and revenge were fierce in the Wolf's heart, and treachery's seed was sown.

Then the challenge of Murad to Lazar : "Never has there been, never shall be, one land in the rule of two masters. Then send *me* thy fortresses' gold keys, and haratch for seven rich summers ; or meet me thyself upon Kossovo, and our swords shall divide us the country !" Vouk whispers of being outnumbered, of one to full three hundred thousand ; but Milosh, like flame, flashes upward : "Shall children of ours call us cowards ? in our graves shall they curse us forever ? Let thy royal word call up thy people, and heroes' blood fall upon Kossovo !" The Czar and the Vojvodes rise fired by his words, and Lazar curses the backward : "To him of Alberian blood who comes not to fight the Turk upon Kossovo, no son nor daughter be born ; no grape grow red nor corn white for him ! Evil be with him forever, to live unloved and die unlamented !"

Waldemar listened, and bent his head ; the curse seemed shaped for him. Yet he had fought and been faithful ; fought first himself, then the world's grief and anguish. Would that the battlefield called him,

¹ Vouk, wolf.

² Kobila, mare,

as Kossovo's fatal day had called Lazar!—one wound, and then peace, rest, oblivion, perhaps to rejoin his beloved. . . .

The time for departure approaches ; the Czar for the last time sits down to his table, his faithful Empress beside him, and she asks him the latest boon. "Gold crown of Alberia, to-morrow thou ridest away with thy Vojvodes ; thy vassals, and all my nine brothers : thou leav'st me alone in the castle, with no man to bring me thy tidings. Oh, leave me, of all my nine brothers, even *one* for the sister to swear by!" The Czar answers mildly: "To-morrow, my Lady! my Empress! Militza! go down to the gates of the fortress: the army will issue by standards, and first will ride Yougovich Boshko, who bears our great gonfalon, cross-topped. To him give my blessing, and let *him* remain with thee here in the castle!" But Boshko rides forth with the standard, in rich cloth of gold, on a mighty bay charger, and, when sad Militza stops him, refuses to give up the flag and return. Then her father rides by, old Youg Bogdan, with seven of her brothers, the Yougovich ; but each, like bold Boshko, refuses her: they must fight and die for the Cross. At last comes the Yougovich Voyin, the youngest of all the nine brothers, who leads the war-chargers of Lazar: she puts her arms round his neck. "O my brother, dear Yougovich Voyin, Czar Lazar has given thee to me! Let others lead forward the chargers ; to thee he has promised his blessing: thou shalt rest with thy sister in Krushevatz—" But Voyin repulses her also ; and the Empress swoons, as he rides away, on the cold stone castle courtyard. Then glorious Czar Lazar rides forward, the Brankovich near him and Obilich Milosh, and, seeing his Empress thus fallen, the tear-drops roll large down his face. He orders his page to bear her tenderly into the castle, and stay with her there . . . but the page,

having carried her safe to her tower, cannot rest, and spurs after to Kossovo.

Waldemar watched the tragedy unfold, with a sense of life's futility. The events of five centuries ago were filing before him vivid as the doings of to-day; and human nature was the same in all its pettiness and grandeur. Jealousy, distrust, dissension, treachery, the same, and all revolving round a patriot emperor whose life was devoted to his country. The scene of the banquet was passing, that last sad feast on the Day of Amosius, the patron saint of Czar Lazar; that feast in his tent upon Kossovo, with the Moslem host hard by. The nobles spoke low of this standard and that which was absent, the Vojvodes who had not come, while the Emperor sat in silence with his head upon his hand. At last he commanded a golden goblet of wine to be brought to him. As he rose and lifted the cup, his tears began to flow, the noble tears of one who is betrayed by those he loves. . . . The Czar sank into his seat, unable to speak, and leaned his head again upon his hand, while his Vojvodes watched him, overwhelmed. At last he spoke.

"My lords, since our nation began, it has had the virtue of faithfulness. But to-day I hear that treachery is amongst us, and my heart is breaking. Three great lords whom I honoured are going to desert me for the Turkish Czar. These three are Ivan Kosanchich, Milan of Toplitza, and Milosh Obilich! Milosh Obilich, loved as my son, to whom I have given my daughter! he to whose faith I was entrusting the command of all my army! . . . I have heard this: I cannot believe it. I rise now to give a toast: to thy health, O Milosh! Be loyal! Do not be faithless! and take this cup of gold in memory of me!"

Milosh recognised the hand of Vouk Brankovich here, and bowed low to the Czar as he answered, "O Czar, the traitor sits now at your side! As for me,

I have never been faithless!" Then, leaving the table, he added, "To-morrow, on Vidov-dan,¹ ye shall all see! To-morrow will show who is true, and who traitor! To-morrow by Murad's death thou shalt see I am ready to die for thee!" And the three great Vojvodes, the bond-brothers, Milosh, Milan, and Ivan, strode from the hall where Vouk Brankovich sat by Czar Lazar.

Waldemar thought of Gadatz, whose devotion made him second-sighted, and whose wisdom he trusted more than any judgment of his own. Gadatz was marked for death since the night of his journey on the mountain—the thought that he lost both sight and life for him was like a sword in the King's heart. Waldemar felt that soon he would be left alone with his mission of mercy, left to wrestle with duty, grief, and madness by himself. The Emperor's faith in the traitor cursed and execrated everlastingly in history, touched the King with the shadow of a premonition dark as death. What if he also should trust, and be betrayed as Lazar was—? But no! . . . The thought was born of those accursed fantasies which sometimes thronged his brain.

Last scene of the tragedy, showing the nation's belief that a higher power planned their empire's fall, is Czar Lazar's choice of the Heavenly Kingdom. The falcon, the grey bird, flies from the holy city of Jerusalem, carrying the swallow; yet not the falcon, but St. Elias with a message from the Mother of God. On the knee of the Czar the bird drops it, and aloud to the Czar speaks the letter. "Brave son of a brave race, O Lazar! Which kingdom of two hast thou chosen? The earthly or heavenly kingdom? If thou chooseth the earthly, to battle! no Turk shall survive thy fierce onslaught. But choose thou the heavenly kingdom, a church thou shalt raise not of

¹ Vitus's Day, or seeing-day.

marble, but pure silk and fine cloth of scarlet ; and there let thine hosts take communion, for all thou commandest shall perish !” When Czar Lazar, the Head of Alberia, hears the scroll speak its mystical message, strange thoughts throng upon him, he wrestles as if between angel and devil. “O dear God, which kingdom? Direct me! . . . The kingdoms of earth are but fleeting, the kingdoms of heaven enduring; yes, heavenly realms everlasting!” And the Czar chose the heavenly kingdom. He raised up a church upon Kossovo, neither of granite nor marble, but pure silk and fine cloth of scarlet. The monks and the Patriarch served there; the Vojvodes and vassals came thronging; and soon the great army was shriven, prepared for the last great battle.

Waldemar leaned back, pale and faint: the scene seemed real to his senses. Thus they had sacrificed long ago to the Great Unknown Ideal; thus he must sacrifice all his life. . . . Did the Heavenly Kingdom await him?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

"Whether at Naishápúr or Babylon,
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter run,
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one."
OMAR KHAYYÁM.

A WIDOWED Grand Duchess, aunt of the King, had consented, since Fredegonde's death, to do the honours of his court, and received the guests at the ball in his stead: he was at the bedside of Gadatz.

The black-mustachioed cat-eyed consort of the Russian Minister was partner to Fokshany, while her husband had the honour of the hand of the Grand Duchess during the quadrille d'honneur. The King was said to be fatigued beyond his strength, but would perhaps re-enter later on. Fokshany conjectured the truth, and inferred that his antagonist was near his end: the conservative statesman felt a lasting rancour against the liberal whose views had formed the King's. Had it not been for the teachings of Gadatz, thought the Premier, Waldemar might have had personal foibles, passive eccentricities, but his views would not have touched the State. Now he was always studying a hundred things best left unstudied—for instance, how to make the taxes bear upon the rich man, not the poor one; how to place justice within reach of naked right, as well as

overbearing opulence; how to diminish the numbers of the worthy unemployed by forming Government monopolies, whose object was the people's profit, not their own; how to diminish prostitution by opening honest avenues of work for women; how to abolish the royal and official nepotism which the system of monarchy induces; how to pay off the national debt, a part of that four billion pounds loan on which, each year, the European peoples must pay interest; how to arrange a system of free but not obligatory education; how, by a scheme of qualified suffrage and electoral government, to train the people's mind to accept the idea of a republic,—the only system of government which permits supreme merit to attain to supreme power. This was all poison to Fokshany, but the King was not to be controlled. What Gadatz had sown the seeds of, Fredegonde had been as sun to in its growth; and what Fokshany was not able to uproot, baffled all the arts and efforts of Vassilio. The Premier found his tool, in that one vital point, as weak as he: no favour that the King refused him, and no argument that he conceded. Fokshany had hoped that Andrassy, coming at the crucial moment of his loss, would gain a permanent influence on the mind of Waldemar; incline him to diversion, dissipation even, science, art, what not, so that it were not government. Enough to keep his brain on merely abstract speculation—but instead . . . Fokshany was disgusted. The King, who, in the time of his late father, took no interest in affairs of state, now occupied himself with them alone, and from a point of view whose liberalism, for him, was scandalous.

"I wish," thought the Premier, "that a *coup d'état* were safe. I would seclude him on pretence of transient loss of reason, and proclaim myself regent. I have often thought of it. But Russia . . ."

All the Premier's reflections on the State were tinged with the idea of Russia. That empire's policy, steadily transmitted from Czar to Czar for generations, of hastening and profiting by Turkey's extinction as an European power, resulted in intrigues which undermined nearly all the Balkan States, convulsing some, and might invade Alberia. Fokshany dreaded plots, spies, broils, kidnappings, political assassinations: it was the triumph of his policy to strike a perfect balance between Austria and Russia. No one had reason for the least complaint, and he was vigilant that none should be invented; his crowning ambition was to strengthen the dynasty by Waldemar's desired marriage. So far, the King had refused to hear of an alliance, and on his father's death had "married" Fredegonde in the only manner which his rank permitted, a manner he himself condemned as one of the most shameful concessions to royalty at morality's expense of which a slavish civilisation has been guilty, but whose bond, between himself and her, he held more sacred still than marriage. Fokshany, a diplomate and roué, could conceive no such attachment as the ideal and romantic passion which united two whose very natures were to him a problem. On Fredegonde's death, he hoped at last to gain his cherished object, and this made him suspect the influence of Ilona, which might again frustrate his ends. That Andrassy had not succeeded in diverting her interest from Waldemar, who loved another, to himself, by means of those flatteries, attentions, assiduities, by which women can be always won (according to Fokshany, whose materialism prevented him from comprehending the more subtle sex), gave rise to a sentiment between the Premier and his pupil which helped to change the future of the kingdom. Vassilio was exposed on two sides to attacks, on one side to seductions. The

delicate sarcasms of Fokshany galled his pride intolerably; the fickle ways of Ilona, now soft, now stern, more tantalising than a settled coldness, kept before him the spectre of an ultimate defeat which he felt, apart from pride, he could not bear. Besides this, he had made a new acquaintance whose influence upon him was already powerful, a Roumanian whose wife was Russian, and who had lately come to reside in Zarilov. Varescu was a tool of the Russian Government, whose spies had scented the Haiduk plot Fokshany, wary as he was, did not suspect, and which divined that here was the weak point sought in vain during the late King's lifetime. The bestowal of the Collar of the Lion on Andrassy had drawn attention to him: and his position in the army classed him amongst those whose co-operation in the plot now hatching was desired. Varescu had watched him closely, discovered his passion for Ilona, divined hers for the King, and worked upon these springs of action. Had he but known it, Vassilio was half a traitor from the day when he saw her on her knees beside Waldemar, trying to staunch his wound with her hair, and crying "Save him—save him!" Now the contempt of Fokshany—his method of spurring to fresh effort; the caprice of Ilona—who sometimes drew him on, to pique the King; and his jealousy of Waldemar—which gnawed him ever more intolerably; laid him at the mercy of whomsoever could point him to power and revenge. Varescu surrounded him with an atmosphere of doubt and expectation; dazzled him with visions of pre-eminence; startled him with hints of great impending change. Vassilio's feminine fibre, with its instincts of treachery and curiosity, responded; volatile and impetuous, he was easily led and turned. It became his fixed idea to force a final decision upon Ilona, and, should she refuse to listen to him, go over to the plotters body

and soul. Gratitude towards the King he did not know, for jealousy had been before it: he felt exultation, not compunction, in the thought of Waldemar's overthrow.

The ball went on in the great saloon of the Konak, built for dancing. The late King had planned the palace in a style which better suited his descent and wealth than the condition of the city; in appearance it was haughty and foreign like himself. Ilona was divided between a certain sense of gratified enmity in thinking of Gadatz, and an irritable expectation of the King's return, which was retarded. Perhaps, though he should die like Fredegonde, Gadatz would still retain, like her, his influence on Waldemar: she did not comprehend that the infrangible nature of affinities which death might change the conditions of, but could not end, was the highest proof of Waldemar's spiritual power and purity. Gadatz's devotion to his master did not nullify her sentiment towards him, as it might have done a gentler woman's, with a sense of sympathy in mutually seeking for the good of one beloved. Her passion for Waldemar was fierce, exclusive, jealous; submissive only to himself, and then submissive solely in response to signs of his submission.

Vassilio found her cold, capricious, and provoking, and was abandoned by her for Dobrinjaz, Fokshany's ancient rival, who asked her for a waltz.

"I followed your hint, my dear Countess," said he, "and will tell you the story to-morrow, if you care to receive a visit from an old beau like myself."

"You mean about Andrassy—?"

"Yes. It is intricate and vastly entertaining; in fact, I spent a great amount of time and care upon it: possibly it may amuse you."

"Very likely, with you to tell it, my dear Dobrinjaz," she answered.

The hour grew late, the King did not re-enter, and the ball at the Konak broke up. Ilona lay awake, with a thousand conjectures of the story of Vassilio's origin. Mara tossed on her bed—she whose bed had been the ground—uneasily, with tear-wet hair. Should she never again see Maxim? Must she wed the pale-faced Papst? Her reinless spirit of the past contended with her new-born sense of grateful duty. Waldemar himself was with Gadatz. The old man's life was going out like some weak lamp-flame, lacking oil, which once shone strong and pure; Theodosi, obliged, for once, to keep a vigil, glided in, in his long black garments like a monk's, to see if life's return or death's approach had stirred his torpor. Each time, he found the figure in the arm-chair as quiet as the figure on the bed. Waldemar sat by an open window on the park, through which a faint leaf-filtered breeze was drifting in; the clock of the stars told midnight and past, and the city lay silent as a tomb. . . . Death again! and so soon—before the first wound's agony was over, before the habit of work had disciplined the mind, and the knowledge of good done had armed the spirit. To one who, like the King, has loved and suffered, has stood beyond the crowd and watched alone, the endless emotions and changes of life, with death and oblivion at their heels, become unmeaning. They stun the mind like trying to count the millions of the stars or fathom space. He stares in the face of the enigma, that enigma hundred-fold, the question of whether the soul, the entity, endures; whether, in another sphere, fate's ravelled skein is wound; whether we shall lose each other, or re-encounter, drawn by links of love; whether pain is universal, and Elysium a poet's dream (poets are but fallen angels who remember heaven still, perhaps); whether death is all things cancelled, or but change; whether love is able to be constant; whether God is good and evil both, or

whether in night's womb two powers battle ; whether all the agony of human life may not be deemed its sin's redemption ; whether . . . questions infinite, unanswerable, all humanity's eternal Why? Waldemar's eyes wandered slowly to the bed, then plunged again into the night. And that deep blue the stars gem, whiter than the unsunned diamond and as cold ; he tried to realise that it was space so limitless that one could lose there sight and soul.

"O ages ever passing, ever coming ! what is your message? What is your goal? The sun is monstrous : he has seen the whole world die a myriad times, and still he lights new births for death to glut on. Death's great confederate, and yet, in the eternity of being, a dip Time's ageless fingers will snuff out. But ah ! this spring returning with her promise, this summer returning with her bloom, this autumn returning with the fruits of earth, when life's dear fruits have been untimely gathered ! What is the smile of the seasons if this earth-life must be all? an irony more terrible than hell. Why do we thirst for godhead, long for life, light, happiness eternal, in the dark? The glow-worm is happier than mighty man : he lights his emerald lantern in the grass, and never longs to be the far green star which burns in fields of night through myriads of ages !"

He looked towards the stirless figure on the bed. Enigma everywhere !

"Truth and death, twin mysteries equally profound ! . . . Perhaps we pass, by logical degrees of spiritual evolution, onward, upward. Perhaps the Easterns dream aright in their idea of earth-lives which assist the soul's development, links of a chain which each, though unawares, makes nearer perfect : for, looking back, how ghostly, how remote, how dreamlike, seem the eras of our lives ; with all their separate surroundings, influences, habits, thoughts,

emotions! All is so mysterious—birth, life, sleep, death; the twin worlds of the seen and the unseen which roll forever onward like those mighty brothers—suns, one dark, one blazing—that no miracle of change, of forgetfulness, of transformation, of duration, is surprising. Perhaps we return, oblivious of former lives and former loves; it would be no stranger than awaking to the prose of day after the poem of some perfect dream. . . . And yet, there are immortal loves, like ours. Achilles bade magnificent defiance to time and death and grey oblivion, when he said above the corpse of Hector, "Though spirits in a future state be oblivious of the past, he will even then remember his beloved companion."

A spasm wrenched his soul: one of those agonies which leave their trace, mental or physical, forever.

"Fredegonde," he muttered, breathless, "Fredegonde! . . . Why have you left me alone?"

. . . He struggled, blind with pain, and conquered: he had sworn to work, not mourn. A sigh heard as he rose from the chaos of the moment, like a swimmer from an overwhelming billow. Gadatz! The old man's eyes were open; there were tears upon his cheeks. Waldemar rose and went towards the bed. He walked like a man exhausted.

"Why do you weep, Gadatz?" he asked, taking his hand. It was the voice of one past tears, for there are many stations in sorrow's Via Crucis.

"Waldemar, son of my soul, for thee I weep! These are the salt and seldom tears of age, which are no longer shed for self. . . ."

"For me, Gadatz? I, who have been a wayward scholar to thee often, loving the bird-haunted forest better than thy books . . . was I that lad, or have I died and do I live again, changed to the marrow? God, what a beautiful world it seemed, blue sky, green earth, and life, dear life, untried before me! . . . Yes,

you may weep for me, old friend who knew me once : that self of mine is dead, and what I am is but its spectre."

"I weep because I am leaving thee, Waldemar, thou who hast need of me now. . . . Who will love thee and know thee as I do? Who will take care of thee?"

"Gadatz, I am worth no care; I ask no love. I only wish that I, not thou, were near my rest."

The old man, deadly pale against his pillows, fixed his sightless eyes upon the King.

"Remember thy work! thou art too noble to throw down thy sword and leave the battle. Waldemar, remember, what thou dost, thou dost for her, thy fair ideal of all ideals!"

There was silence; the King had clasped his chilling hand: Gadatz lay spent and still. . . . Abruptly, the old man struggled up, his white hair wild, and spoke.

"Waldemar, I am dying—no, call no one; these last moments are for thee. It has come to me—be warned—some danger is about thee—which I cannot see. . . . I cannot see! What, blind! . . . " The horror of the flash was on him. Waldemar rose and clasped him in strong arms.

"Thou too—!" he murmured, laying the venerable head upon his breast. "Thou, who wert to me more than my father! All that I had left! Fate can find no more treasures of the heart to rob me of, when thou art gone, Gadatz. . . . The kingdom: let it take the kingdom, all that it has left—the crown that brands my forehead!"

"Waldemar . . . " The old man's voice was but a breath, and near his last: his mind was clear again. "The dangers of this world thou welcomest, and yet, beware! . . . I cannot tell thee why, but I must warn thee. It is strong upon me; I must warn thee

quick before I go. . . . Son of my heart, farewell—my blessing on thee. . . .” The King supported him in rigid arms. Suddenly Gadatz’s form dilated. His eyes’ blind gaze seemed reading words of fire in the secret book of fate. His lips moved, trembled, writhed, but made no sound. He pointed into space with shaking hands . . . and fell back senseless.

Waldemar pressed a glass of cordial to his lips, and called him back with every tender name of love and sorrow. His eyelids raised again: he seemed to have already passed beyond the boundaries of the world. Now no shadows of the mundane show seemed powerful to stir him: peace alone dwelt solemn on his brows, the peace of loftier life with that of death.

. . . Waldemar fell on his knees by the bed, and kissed the old man’s hand, already cold. Gadatz’s ultimate gaze was fixed upon him, as if in the supreme last hour his blindness’ veil were rent.

“Son of my heart . . . we meet—beyond. . . .” he breathed, and life’s pale spark went out.

Theodosi had dropped from dose to slumber in the anteroom. The King knelt on. Life and death, the past and the veiled future, seemed to throng upon and then glide by him. “Beyond” . . . one step, so short, across the black abyss whose mouth has swallowed worlds. The King knelt on: it seemed to him he took the step, that hand still in his own, and reached his kingdom.

“Yes, heavenly realms everlasting!” echoed the voice of Czar Lazar on Kossovo. Even thus they had sacrificed long ago to the Great Unknown Ideal.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DAY OF SAINT JOVAN

“Farewell !

For in that word,—that fatal word,—howe’er
We promise—hope—believe,—there breathes despair . . . ”

LORD BYRON.

IT was dawn. The sun reddened the far peak of Sokol. All the camps round the Kloster wakened, one first, then many, like the birds. They were tuneful, like birds too, with a hundred songs—here the praise of the husbandman, who has black hands, but eats white bread ; there the celebration of the hardy Haiduk who, like the grey falcon, darts down on his prey, and tears from the Turk by robbery what by robbery he mastered ; now the tale of the home-coming bride, who will not dismount at the castle-gates till the dungeon-keys are hers that she may set the prisoners free ; then the terrible song of the bond-brothers, madly enamoured, who plunge their daggers deep in the breast of their Turkish love that they may not fight for her sake. The young girl tossing her garland to the brook, or confessing to the youth that, gazing on him, she had grown up graceful in his sight ; the old man whose soul, when he goes to meet his God, is pure as the breath of a flower ; the generous victor who, leading out his captive to warm himself in the sun, at last sets him free with only the True God to guarantee his ransom ; the bickerings of the household, where mothers and

sisters-in-law dispute so that the swallow congratulates the cuckoo on not being obliged to listen to them ; the housewife who now gives the nosegay, which once she would have set in water in the evening, to the careless child to play with, who throws it amongst the sweepings ; the old father who, when the head of his son's assassin is set before him, murmurs, " Blessed am I to-day and forever ! " and expires in peace ; the village feast ; the wedding procession ; the marriage-gift ; the bond-brothers and sisters who kiss through green garlands on choosing each other after Easter ; all familiar scenes and figures find their way into the songs the people sing, sometimes to the one-stringed gusle, sometimes unaccompanied, when tending their flocks or at the plough. Now the camps about Kloster Sokol roused for the festal day, and the monks made ready for the great work of confession and communion which would occupy the morning. Strong and feeble, old and young, came thronging to the Kloster, some bearing with them the sick whom they hoped to cure by the virtue of the sacred streamlet's waters.

Guamar was paler than usual, his eyes wild : and reminded many, with his jet-black hair, of his father, the glorious Veliko. Miloutim was roused from his habitual stolid slyness into malice-bred activity ; his eyes were never off Bosilika, unless they fixed on Guamar with a sullen gleam of hate. The girl herself was white and startled, as if the midnight hour of terror were just past : her look besought the singer to stay near her, and she watched the son of Stroimir with growing dread. Maxim, strong as he was, looked older, wearier, than before ; he had been wrestling between the thought of home and that of love, and had resolved at last to go and seek for Mara. As for Loubitza, she was flattered by Miloutim's conspicuous preference for Bosilika, and helped

him to keep near them through the day, against the will of sister and bond-brothers. When, having confessed, they came to take communion all together, Guamar and Bosilika clasped hands unseen: to them the holy sacrament seemed earnest of a sweeter sacrament to come.

Afternoon saw the youthful sports begin; and the fair and market kept the elders busy; while the old, with all their weight of simple wisdom, sat together deep in consultation. Young men who wished to find a bride were here, and searched the kolo's merry circle for sweet faces; others wrestled; many vied in casting pebbles from their well-aimed slings. The youths and girls took hands around and danced the kolo, in circles sometimes double, sometimes large, and sometimes small, with a shuffling and balancing and short excited cries, all dressed in their proudest attire. The dancers, with their short-featured dark-eyed Slavic faces and richly-coloured clothing, were dazzlingly picturesque. The women wore their striped skirts finely kilted and fantastically caught about them, in front an apron of the bright-striped gold-run stuff which they weave upon their hand-looms. Some had bodices embroidered thick with gold, the richest even velvet; and at the waist shone the broad wrought buckles, silver, brass, or silver-gilt, which they attach there. The chemise was embroidered at the sleeves and throat, and often coins were hung there like a breastplate: sometimes the head-dress, even, was a double wreath of coins, overlapping like scales, which framed the face; while behind, with married women, flowed a kerchief, and, with girls, bright flowers and ornaments were twisted in the hair. The youths wore gorgeous gold-embroidered Turkish jackets, which showed shirt-fronts richly worked with silk or sewn with beads: at the edges—cuffs, borders of petticoats glimpsed between the women's aprons and

upgathered skirts, hems of the lad's white tunics, collars—embroideries were thick. There was the coquetry of vanity and youth in these gay handkerchiefs, bright beads, gilt clasps, and garments all embroidered. Bands of gipsy musicians played quick kolo tunes by ear, dark-faced wanderers who followed the feasts from village to village through the land. A train of gipsy women, headed by one lofty-statured, fiery, yet solemn hag, appeared in contrast with the dancing girls and lads, and told them wondrous fortunes. Some of the youths were handsome and possessed by the dancing devil, but the girls, mild-mannered, stepped demurely round. Everybody wore his best, and danced like Punchinello, but there was one hapless soul too poor to even possess a jacket. He, however, danced like old Nicholas himself, with grim determination, in his shirt.

"Come and dance!" cried Miloutim, seizing Bosilika's hand with a brutal laugh, and pulling her towards the circle forming, though she shrank and tried to slip his hold. He had been drinking raki, which he thought the feast-day's chief attraction, and his liking for the girl increased with the potent spirit's influence and his sullen jealousy of Guamar. A feeling of intolerant monopoly possessed him: she was to be his betrothed, and yet the cursed singer was for ever at her side. He would not have it. "Come and dance the kolo with me, Bosa!"

She cast a glance about her, the terror of the midnight vision still in her eyes; and then, with a little cry, tore her hand from his rough grasp, and ran to Guamar.

"Thou," she cried, like a child, and caught his arm with both her hands, "thou art my partner! I will not dance with Miloutim unless it pleases me!"

The son of Stroimir stood glaring at them, stupidly furious, his great fists clenched. Petulant hussy! he

would cure her of her tricks. He strode up to seize her by the wrist.

"Hands off!" cried Guamar.

"Ha! I'll settle with thee!" shouted Miloutim.

They flung off their jackets and wrestled. Bosilika, caught by the excitement of the struggle, looked on, her love-lock in her fingers, with a guilty little smile. Miloutim, too, was tall and strong; she ought not to have vexed him so, perhaps. But then she loved Guamar, and she was too pretty to be carried off to dance, without consent, like other girls. How hard they battled! Stroimir's son was like a bull, and Guamar like the royal eagle. And then it was all for her . . . all for her. Up came Loubitza, storming.

"Now thou hast set them by the ears like snarling dogs, thou wench! thou good-for-nothing! What will thy grandfather Lazar say?—I'll tell him, and *he'll* beat the vanity out of thee! Two fine lads as in all wide Sokol, and thou needs must set them to fighting like fiends! Shame on thee, now, for a cuckoo-hearted jade, thou faggot of pranks and vagaries!"

The girl came close to her, making little signs to stop her, and glancing at the youths, both yet unthrown; she was on tiptoe of eagerness to see the issue of the fight, and wished not to disturb it. Miloutim was puffed and panting; Guamar pallid, with clenched teeth. Which would be strongest? *She* was the prize. She would go and dance with the victor. . . . A circle had formed, a ring of eager faces, laughing lips, and sparkling eyes. Bosilika played with her love-lock: all would know it was for her. She had not been carried away to the dance, undisputed, like another. . . . There was a murmur of men's and a babble of women's voices in the crowd. The two were swaying in a final mighty effort each to throw the other.

"Loubitza, Loubitza!" Bosilika cried, clinging fast to the matron as she watched them. "It is Guamar—no—yes, Guamar, Holy Mary! It is Guamar who will fall—no! Miloutim!"

They flew apart, and Stroimir's son went down like lead upon the ground. Guamar stood a second with bent brows and straining nostrils, then came forward.

"Thou art mine, Bosilika!"

He put on his jacket, and offered her his hand. She was blushing and beaming with pleasure. Miloutim picked himself up, with the scowl of a demon, as they joined the dance together.

By evening the Kloster was rid of its guests, with the exception of a few. The heads of the revolutionary movement and the Russian agent, once more an honoured pilgrim to the Kloster, gathered to consult in the apartment of the Archimandrite.

"He and a few more gained over, we can hold the city," said the Russian, "with the troops. Varescu thinks he will be ours before another fortnight's past: a woman makes short work of us sometimes!"

"And Leonti?" asked the Archimandrite anxiously.

"Stojan the Prota suspects him, and watches. If he finds him playing traitor, or likely to—"

"Kill him! kill him!" snarled the old wolf, with his cruel grin. "That makes an end of everything."

"Thou art right, Lazar," Stroimir answered. "For the traitor, always death!"

"Stojan says he will see to that," said the Russian, with a half-smile, emptying his glass of crystal Kloster wine. "The thing is, whom can we select to send Fokshany and the King to their account? It must be done at night; the city taken by surprise and Stroimir proclaimed before a pistol can be fired. We want one who attends the King—Andrassy's self, perhaps, would fill the billet—"



"Impossible!" cried Jovan. "He has been the bosom friend of the Usurper!"

The Russian smiled his half-smile, with a little cutting laugh.

"The very reason he should do it. However, we had better let that be till later on, when time and place are settled. Your Highness must hold yourself in readiness to proceed at any moment to the capital. I will assist you to disguise yourself, and accompany you thither."

"And what shalt thou do with Miloutim?" asked Lazar.

"Leave him here with thee to head the rebellion," answered Stroimir, "and prove that he is worthy of his race!" The Haiduk's eyes flashed fire; his brow was like a thunder-cloud whose bolt is in its bosom; the purpose of vengeance and victory made him hero, almost demi-god.

Guamar accompanied Maxim as an escort to Loubitza and Bosilika returning to the valley; he would wait till the Feast of St. Jovan was over, and then go back to the mountains. The bond-brothers walked through the sunset hour a little before their charges; a sadness had come upon them unawares, as the rose-flush changed to purple on the hills.

"Pobratim," slowly said Maxim, "dost thou remember the day when thou didst choose me in place of thy dead brother, and I came and loosed thy bonds?"

"Yes, brother," answered Guamar softly.

"Dost thou remember how we swore the oath, deep in the forest, at a ruined kloster's altar?"

"I remember, brother," answered Guamar.

"Brother," said Maxim tenderly, throwing his arm about the other's shoulders, "I have a secret to tell thee, and a charge to leave thee—"

"Leave me—?" cried the singer.

"Leave thee, my brother. To-morrow, when the sun goes down, I leave the valley."

"Maxim! thou! Where to go? What to do?"

"I am going to seek for Mara. Guamar, thou dost not know what days and nights I have gone through since she was rescued in the forest. I have waked, when the moon was going down, with those shrieks of hers in my ears; I have thought of her loved by the Usurper, whom she praised to me as if he were St. Jovan's self; I have wondered where she is, and what she does, and who is near her, till my soul is worn with thought. And of late it seems to me that she calls me—"

"Calls thee? . . ."

"Ay, Guamar; I hear her call. When sleep and waking mix, her voice comes shrilling, 'Maxim! Maxim!' And when I rest at noon and think, it starts me like a ghost. She cannot come back to me here, but she needs me, for her heart calls loud to mine. I have waited, brother, till danger and dread were over, but now I leave the valley."

"Where wilt thou go? Old Lazar—"

"Ay, I know that he would kill me like a kite, if he should hear it. He struck at *her*, to kill her, with his spade, once. Besides, they tried to murder her there alone in the forest Jagoda when she fled. . . . No, no, brother; she calls me, I must find her: she may be in trouble or danger. I have done my duty to the household; Lazar himself comes back before the week is out: I am going to Zarilov. They have left the lake Lasnitza; she is gone to Zarilov, and I will follow."

"But, brother, thou wilt return?" asked Guamar. "Thou wilt not leave thy sister—?"

"There is the wrench!" cried Maxim. "If I could, I would bring home my happy bride. But thou knowest how all of them hate her—I alone will

love her to the death! Listen, brother: I am tired of plots and dread and bloodshed, and have sworn no oath like thine, and I believe she loves me. Thou shalt remain to guard Bosilika and tell the tale to Lazar when he comes, and I— If she does not love me, I shall journey back—my feet will bring me as they took me; but if she loves me—ah, if she loves me!—I will make a new home far away with her!”

“Dobar stchast, da bog ti i sveti Jovan! Good fortune to thee, my brother, in the name of God and St. John!”

They walked on silently a while: the sun had sunk in purple clouds and gold.

“I wish thou wert to wed Bosilika,” said Maxim. Fiery yet dreamy Guamar started like a man struck unawares. “She cares for Miloutim, I think. I wish she loved thee, brother.”

“Perhaps she does,” said Guamar.

“Rather than give her to Miloutim, brother, I would have thee end thy career as many another Haiduk has, with the otmitsa. Carry her off to the mountains, and Sima with you, to perform the marriage!”

“Thou would’st consent, then? Maxim, think, for I am mad with joy! Rather improvident Veliko’s son than Stroimir’s, who will have the kingdom?”

“Rather a happy wife than queen—and wife to thee, my brother.”

They gazed into each other’s eyes, and then embraced.

“Then listen, Maxim,” exclaimed Guamar. “First I will try to win herself, then Lazar’s favour and consent, and if I cannot—I will aid them to the death in Stroimir’s cause, and ask her for reward; and if that fails, why, I will take her!”

“Bravely said, brother! thou didst to-day, and so why not to-morrow? . . . Hearken: I cannot bear

to leave thee and the valley, leave Bosa, my sister, forever ; so let us vow to meet, St. Jovan's holy day five years to come, where we swore the pobratstvo. Wilt thou be there, if we live, at the altar?"

"I will, dear brother, I will! . . . Ah, but to lose thee!"—the singer wept on the breast of his brother-in-God.

St. Jovan was also the patron of the village, the valley's tutelary genius. Even as every household had its Ikon, whose sacred day it feasted, so every village feasted and honoured the sacred day of its Saint. The Festival of St. Jovan was also honoured for itself ; that day of fires, when the sun stood still in the heavens thrice for awe.

"My last day in the valley, Guamar," murmured Maxim. "Can it be?" They had joined the rest when Sima called the people to a height above the village, where the Papst, all beaming, consecrated water and oil, and blessed his flock. It was a pleasant sight to see him lead the pious procession through the fields, the elders of the valley bearing images and crosses, while green-garbed summer ruled the world. Later on, the shepherds lit the birch-bark torches made ready the evening before, and walked round their folds and pens to call good fortune and baulk death and evil spirits ; then they mounted to the height, and let the fires burn out while they enjoyed their sports. Evening fell, and Maxim bade Bosilika good-night more tenderly than usual. The bond-brothers embraced, and lay down side by side: they talked together far into the night.

It was dawn, or that prescient hour when a magic light makes wonder in the east ; when stars shine large and fulgent on the jewelled gates of day ; when jacinth, topaz, beryl, chrysolite, and amethyst seem melted into seas of subtle glory ; when night's dim

brow is crowned with the aurora of the phantom day. The bond-brothers walked through the valley, by the stream Ovchariza the Shepherdess ; up the gorge, for the way would lead to the north where the capital lay. A breeze was stirring, like earth's long breath as the dawn's first kisses wake her ; far in the woods, where dark still reigned, sang the amorous nightingale.

"Sima's house," said Maxim, with a pang. "He was always kind to her . . . Ask his blessing on us, Guamar, when thou seest him once more."

"Yes, brother," answered the singer ; he was troubled to the heart, and words seemed futile to his sorrow. They passed the low doorway the Popadia kept so clean, and seemed to hear a faint lament within.

"What's that?" cried Maxim, listening. "'Help, help!' Nay, Father Sima, I am ready!"

He knocked with strong fists, and another moment brought the fat Popadia to the door.

"Why, Maxim, Guamar! What Saint has sent ye in the nick of time to help a wretched soul like me? Ay, wretched, for thou knowest he was always devil-rid, but now he truly hath gone mad!" She hurried them in. "Though perhaps he will take ye for another crop of devils coming up, lads. I fear it is to punish me for saying he was mad the day he ran off on the ass, that this has got him. Look!" and she brought them to the bedside of the Papst, who seemed inanimate.

"Sima, Father Sima!" Maxim cried, appalled, and knelt beside him, fearing he was dead.

"I am no more," answered Sima solemnly. "I say I am no more!" He crossed his fat hands upon his chest, as he supposed, or on his stomach, as it happened.

Maxim rose, and looked at the Popadia, in doubt. Not dead, although he said so. Was the Papst at

last possessed, himself, after having exorcised so many others?

"Father Sima . . ."

"Nay, believe it not: I am a shell, a gourd, a bubble. What thou seest, once was Sima; but now 'tis hollow, empty, void. Make me my funeral feast at once, for why should I delay it? What! dost thou rave of drugs and physic? I am physicked once for all."

Maxim caught the Popadia by the arm.

"What ails him?" he muttered. "Is he raving?"

Sima suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, face puffed, fat hands spread to support him.

"Thou art a youth which I have loved in life, or else I would at present curse thee soundly. What, what! I rave—I drivell—I blaspheme! What else hast thou to say before my deathbed?"

"Father Sima—" murmured Maxim, much abashed at the rebuke, "thou lookest healthy . . ."

"Healthy!" howled Sima. "I am marked for death in thirty days. My heart is eaten."

Maxim started back: could he have heard aright?

"Thy heart—" he gasped.

"Is eaten. Have I not said so? Who should know but I? Fie, fie, thou art a quibbling generation!"

Maxim turned to the Popadia again, perhaps to escape Sima's starting eyes.

"Nay," said she, as if a question had been asked. "This time 'tis his own brains and not the bacon."

"Mother of God!" cried the young man. "What are we to do? We must persuade him. . . . Father Sima, thou hast dreamed a dream, or maybe had the nightmare. Come, 'tis dawn of day; get out of bed, and think about thy breakfast. All the devils which thou fearest so are fled—vampire, ghoul and demon, grave-pig, death-horse, all the witches; perhaps thou

hast had the Black Dog on thy chest—" But Sima, with a howl, had fallen prone.

"Witches!—fled!" he exclaimed, but in a whisper. "Yea, but first they ate me up alive. . . . Ah, ye will believe it when ye have my corpse to wash, and not before—mistrustful infidels! . . . Hark. Thou knowest well that wjeshtize quit their bodies, and, like other spirits, fly about in fire. Meanwhile the babe is not safe in his cradle, the slumberer on his couch, for they hover invisible over the sleeper they have doomed, they fix on him the baleful glare of their red eyes which reflect the fires of hell, they open the left side of the breast with an accursed rod of magic, and while they name above him an appointed day of death, they tear his heart out and devour it. . . . Oh, I am sick and queasy—I feel the starting clammy sweat! I, that was full and round, am come to nought, and dwindled to an empty egg-shell! Heaven have mercy on my soul—if the damned hags ate not up my soul as well. Heaven give me fortitude to wait the day without too loud a cursing!"

"But the wound—?" ventured Maxim, more than half convinced.

"Dost thou think that I have been in battle? Wouldst thou cavil impiously above my corpse? The rod which severs ribs and flesh can shut them up again, and I shall live till the appointed day, then die, accursed as a Turk, without my vitals!"

Nothing could move him from the dread belief; they left him in the hands of the Popadia.

"The True God grant it be not so," she said. "But never, before this, has Sima fought against his breakfast."

The bond-brothers mounted the gorge, and left the little stream, the Shepherdess, behind them. The path wound away to the heights and the forest, passing on by Sokol.

"I shall ask the dwarf for another rose, and carry it to Mara," said Maxim, gazing towards the proud summit glorious in the distance with the sun's first ray. Guamar remembered the crag, the cave, the precipice, the river; Bosilika's midnight vision alone amongst the Kloster tombs, and shuddered. Was that the curse of the vili upon him, which doomed him unhappy in death . . . ? He was roused by the well-loved voice of Maxim, tenderer than usual and lingering: "Here we part!"

They had reached a height above the valley, and its quiet homes lay orchard-bosomed at their feet. Maxim threw his arm about the shoulders of the singer with his fond familiar gesture, and looked down. Old days, old hopes, old thoughts, old dreams, came back to him like leaves blown sere along an autumn storm. To fully appreciate a place, one must leave it; a thing, one must lose it; a love, one must mourn it. The first tears of his manhood wet his eyes as he looked down upon the valley, and then into his comrade's face.

"Brother . . ."

"Brother . . ."

They embraced. It was over: one must go, and one must stay.

"St. Jovan's Day five years to come, by the altar, brother?"

"Yes, dear brother, if we live."

It was over: Maxim's face was set towards the troublous world, and Guamar's to the tranquil valley.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DIE IS CAST

"Jacta est alea!"—JULIUS CÆSAR.

"**F**OKSHANY is luckily so occupied with combating the King's new liberal tendencies and projects, and rejoicing over the death of Dr. Gadatz, that we plotters pass unnoticed," thought Varescu. "But caution always—caution above all!"

Every day increased Vassilio's restless jealousy and doubt. Every day his resolution to succeed or to revenge himself grew more intense. Every day he listened more greedily to hints of future power and grandeur. Every day he felt a more consuming hatred of the King. An absolute need of action came upon him. He must speak to Ilona. The situation's nervous tension was too intolerable: it must end.

It was the hottest hour of the July day, and afternoon half over. Ilona was dozing, with a book upon her knee, in a luxurious reclining-chair, alone. The city, with its white ways and white houses, was asleep; the Konak, sleeping, stared across the square; no breeze stirred the trees of the park beyond, or reached the windows shut since dawn and shaded to retain night's coolness.

The Countess started and raised her head. A tap upon the boudoir door. . . . Who, at this hour of sleep and silence, would disturb her but . . . she rose.

The King? She stood irresolute: her heart was beating hard. Should she call, or open—? . . . The light knock was repeated. She sank into her chair again, and answered, "Come!"

Vassilio entered.

There was almost a spark of hate in her eyes as she met his heavy-lidded steadfast gaze; unsmiling, the look of a man who measures his opponent at the duel.

"You, Captain Andrassy?" she said, as his handsome figure showed against the shutting door. "I thought the household was asleep, and even those wretched sentinels before the Konak!"

"I envy the sleepers," he answered. "Men who sleep have easy minds. . . . Forgive my coming here to weary you because I cannot steal my paradise in dreams."

There was silence, she considering his smileless earnestness in contrast to his one-time buoyant banter, and he with every sense strained on her answer, eye and ear as well as subtler intuition.

"Perhaps you will give me my fan?" said Ilona, pointing to a Moorish table. "Thank you." And she smiled, looking up with eyes whose childlike guilelessness was sometimes sword and shield together.

Vassilio resumed his seat. Was she determined not to hear him, or about to listen favourably at last?—that soft glance might mean either. God! was there ever seen since Eve herself a woman so beguiling and so undividable?

"I am in doubt," said Andrassy, seized with a cruel impulse to make her, unawares, the arbitress, perhaps, of the King's fate for life or death, "about a project. Shall I put it through, or not?"

"What project?" she murmured, with a little smile of lazy provocation; she thought that he was going to speak of love. Perhaps he might amuse her.

"No, I will not tell you what. I want your answer ; and to give it you must be as blind as Fortune."

"Well, then, take the answer Fortune always gives to me. Let us throw the dice, and see." She left him startled, and passed into another room, where she unlocked her jewel-case. "Look," she said, returning with a little dice-box of gems and enamel in her hand. "These are my augurs, my sibyls. I always play my left against my right."

He took the box, their hands touched, and he bit his lip. What futile pretexts for putting off the greater throw which he had come to hazard ! He despised himself.

"It shall be Yes if I win, and No if I lose," said Ilona, amused with her impromptu. "Throw !" She watched the dice bound downwards, with a smile ; they were of gold, the points in little diamonds.

"Now you shall know what fate decrees !" she laughed, and shook them till they tinkled. "Ought I to lose or win?—I wonder which you wish me to, for I would do the other !" . . . She paused, and glanced at him with roguish raillery, her finger at her lips. His steady gaze disturbed her : there was more than love's alphabet of fire in his eyes ; more than mere tenderness, eagerness, entreaty, passion—a hidden thought she could not read. "What are you thinking of ?" she murmured suddenly ; setting down the little jewelled cup, and fixing the same childlike look upon him which was both defence and spell.

"I am thinking of the dice's answer," said Vassilio, and he did not flinch. She shrugged her shoulder, and threw. The golden dice flew sparkling down, and flashed the answer from their brilliants' hundred facets—double sixes !

"Yes !" cried Ilona. "And now—" capricious as a child to whom a story has been promised, "for the project. Tell me !"

"Why should I tell you?" cried Vassilio. "You would only listen and laugh." He paused: it was a pleasure to hear her jest unawares on the peril of Waldemar—his rival; he remembered the Pompeian dancing-girls, and how red lava stopped the dance.

"If I listen," said Ilona perversely, "you are honoured; if I laugh, why, you have done your duty and amused me."

"Shall I never do more than amuse you?" he exclaimed, leaning forward, with lightning in his eyes.

She drew back, glanced at him as if in doubt, and began to play with the dice.

"Who knows?" she murmured, with a subtle smile, half scorn. "Perhaps my toys can tell you!"

He stretched a hand as white and supple as her own, and took away the tinkling treasure.

"Ilona, have done with jest," he said. "I cannot bear it. I have come here for the truth at last, and it is life or death to me."

"Bah!" she cried softly, sinking back in her chair with an air of good-natured raillery. "That is only man's usual perversity, because you know I do not love you."

Vassilio looked at her a moment, dazed, then seized her hands.

"You say that to torture me! You don't know what it means to me!" he cried.

She tried to draw one of her hands away, and pouted.

"Think how I love you! It sends me mad. I thought love was pleasure, mere amusement, till you came, but you taught me—"

"That it may be hell?"

She looked up with her fathomless dauntless eyes in which a half-hid mockery was masking. He stood beside her at full height.

"Did you ever love enough to find it so?" he asked her.

She tried again to draw her hand away, and this time with a pretty frown.

"You hurt it—!"

"I will not let it go!" exclaimed Andrassy. "It has fixed a hundred daggers in my heart, and I shall keep it till I know the truth, apart from all your cursed coquetries. Why do you keep me on the rack, now kind, now cold? Do you enjoy it? Can't you see that I have reached that point where men have done with all disguises? You cannot coax me with a smile, or stop me with a frown, as once you used to. No, I cannot do without your love, and I will have it—or die for it . . . or kill for it!"

"What!" cried Ilona, quick to her feet. "You dare to threaten me?"

"I dare anything!" Vassilio exclaimed, beside himself with jealous fury.

She tore her hands from his hold.

"Leave the room!" she commanded, pointing to the door. "Leave my presence!" He had never seen her so superb in pride and courage, so beautiful, so irresistible. As they stood confronted, another phase of her flashed on his memory: the loving woman kneeling by the bed, and murmuring in unconscious ears the magic words, "The future—all light, all hope, all love!" Could nothing move her, melt her? . . . She gave a slight imperious stamp, still pointing to the door. . . . Andrassy knelt at her feet.

"Ilona, Ilona, do not send me away!" he muttered, overcome with passion. Would she never be gracious and pitying to him as to the man who had not loved her? "What you make me suffer is too much—I cannot stand it, and it sends me mad! Why do you never think of that? You believe that men who love you are as cold as you are!"

He was at her mercy; his febrile, fickle nature, with its feminine subtlety, betrayed him: he broke down

at the point where iron firmness might have mastered her, and forced her to respect if not submission.

"You are a foolish boy to make me angry," she said, her voice still menacing but now contemptuous. "You gain nothing—nothing!—and lose all. You must not kiss my gown: I will not have it. And if you want to kneel, kneel down before the Ikon; he has patience—I have none." She sank back, haughtily negligent, into her chair. "You had better go, you know," she said.

Vassilio rose and stood before her. Did he love or hate her most? He knew she had suffered, yet where was Suffering's sweet twin, Sympathy? . . . He felt, for the first time, something like despair. Although his engrossing passion for her had burnt away vanity like some alloy, his nature's buoyancy sustained a hope which could not cease without a struggle.

"And now—?" said Ilona. She was dropping the jewelled dice into her hand and back again. "I have given you your answer, have I not, 'apart from all my cursed coqueties'?"

He winced.

"You know I love your coqueties," he answered. "How can I help it?—they are part of you. . . . What can I say?" he burst out. "What am I to do? I would fling away my life itself to win you!"

Ilona softened: she had never thought to hear his gay clear voice with such a ring of misery in it.

"Sit down," she said. "I do not want to be too cruel to you. Come, be reasonable. This is only a caprice; you will get over it—men always do. As for me, I am a widow, and I wish to hear no more of love or marriage: they are fetters, both of them."

"Fetters," said Andrassy, "that eat into one's flesh! You lock them fast enough, but will not wear them. . . . Set me a task to do, a hundred

labours; tell me to go through blood and fire for your sake—I'll do it! Is there no way to win you? Show me how, Ilona, and I—" he stopped. She saw the hot blood dye his forehead. He fixed his flashing eyes upon her own. "I wonder," he said, with a powerful effort to control himself, "whether you are cold as this to all, or whether I alone displease you."

"You men amuse me," murmured Ilona, laughing. "The core of all your love is jealousy!"

"And why not?—why not?" exclaimed Andrassy, leaping to his feet. "You laugh at my jealousy, then!—perhaps you ridicule it to the King! Have you never been jealous yourself? Have you never tried in vain to seize a love as precious to you as your life? Have you never—never . . ."

"Are you mad?" she murmured, as he paused white-lipped, the final words unspoken. Her speech turned the balance. Pointing at her in his rage a thousand times redoubled:

"Have you never cursed the name of Fredegonde as I do Waldemar's?" he asked her.

"Coward!" cried Ilona, "coward!" She dealt him the epithet twice, like a blow on the mouth. They stood face to face, breathing battle, and then she broke into a scoffing laugh.

"What a love to offer *me*! Base enough to strike where its caresses are unwelcome! Base as its base-born source—Fokshany's illegitimate son!"

It was she who pointed now, her white hand firm as marble, at his face. Had every word been hot iron, that hand would have branded him unflinching.

"Fokshany's illegitimate son . . ." Andrassy muttered, stunned. "*I?*" And then, "A calumny! By God, were you a man—" his hand shut on his lion-hilted sabre.

"Go to Fokshany himself, if you want a man to fight," laughed Ilona. All the irony, derision, insolence, a voice could ring and sting with, were in hers.

"I will," said Vassilio. He strode towards the door, then sharply turning on his heel, came back and faced her. "Remember," he said, head back and eyes undaunted, with a smile as cruel as her own, "remember, the day when my project is accomplished, that your own hand cast the die!"

CHAPTER XXVI

TREASON

"Since 1848 the parts played by Turkey and Russia respectively have been completely reversed. The Turk has ceased to be the oppressor, the Russian to be the protector of the Christians in the East. The Sultan is become the sole support of the Serbs and of the Roumani against the Muscovite aggressions. The Bulgarians feel, too, that their nationality has no more dangerous enemies than those very instigators of revolt, who come to them from St. Petersburg with their pockets full of lying proclamations."—LEOPOLD VON RANKE.

WHEN Vassilio quitted Ilona, he was outraged, repulsed, defiant; but, an hour later, when he left Fokshany's house, he was nonplussed, furious, and revengeful. The Premier had merely smiled, narrowed his undecipherable eyes, and told the young man to beware of rash ideas which might conduct him into some forgotten fortress. Vassilio left him in his large old chair before the huge desk with its fast-locked secrets, and came into the still white street like one distraught, his only thought revenge. Fokshany did not know what a weapon was ready to his pupil's reckless hand: at the instant Varescu appeared, and the two men strolled off arm in arm.

That night, a meeting was secretly held at the house of the Roumanian: several officers, a priest or two—Leonti's pale face, with snake-eyed Stojan's always near it; a lawyer in whose hands two hundred thousand rubles¹ had been placed, by a Panslavist

¹ £24,000 were put in the hands of Mathejeff for the Panitz plot.

committee in St. Petersburg, to help dethrone the King; an ex-officer in the Russian army, now a merchant in Zarilov, in constant communication with Rustchuk, Adrianople, and Odessa; one or two mistaken patriots, possessed of the idea of Stroimir's claim upon the throne, who forgot that, while Turkey was once the tyrant of the Balkan States, she is now their only bulwark against Muscovite aggression; and finally, disguised, the noted agitator Levisohn, dragoman at the Russian Legation at Bukharest, and long agreed with Varescu on the outlines of the plot.

"A pity we could not have arranged it for a year ago, on the late King's death. Then there would have been no need of bloodshed. A riot or so here and there, some active handful of sopajis,¹ and we could have called the world to witness that the country was tired of the Usurper's dynasty, and anxious for another rule—what rule it would have been *His*² to determine."

"Well said, Levisohn, but Death and Fokshany were too quick for us. The late King died of apoplexy, and the Premier proclaimed King Waldemar at once, assembling the troops and the Skouptchina. With a Russophile Premier like Barochevatz there would have been no proclamation, and a military force would have overawed the Skouptchina on pretext of saving the country from radicalism and revolution."

"We must be able to depend on the garrison," said the ex-dragoman. "Besides, the bands of refugees who fought for Vlastimir and fled Alberia on his death, are armed and ready to return from several sides at once, and will be joined within the country by the Haiduks, who await the signal in the mountains and forests, where troops, if sent

¹ Literally, "men with clubs."

² The Czar.

against them, could be harassed, surprised, and cut to pieces without trouble."

"That signal should be Fokshany's death and the King's," said Varescu. "The assassinations can be laid upon some haiduk of the following or family of Vlastimir. These men are bound, according to traditional rule, to revenge the death of any of their comrades, even to the ninth degree of kin, and how much more that of their hero!"

"Between them they can set upon small military and gendarmerie stations, seize telegraphic and all other means of communication, beat up insurgents," said Levisohn, "and make enough disturbance for our purpose. *Himself* has deigned to approve the report, based on my own, regarding the measures needful and possible for establishing our Government's authority here, which Nicolaieff Feodorovitch¹ forwarded a month ago to Petersburg."

"But the question lies with the army," said Risoff, the ex-officer. "We must be certain of the army, and especially of the city's garrison. Is Captain Andrassy pledged so far as his company is concerned?"

"Yes," said Vassilio. His face was deadly pale, which, taken with his haggard eagerness of glance, made him look a decade older since the morning. He had bargained with Varescu that his portion of the spoils should be the post of Minister of War in the Provisional Government, one for which he could not be less fitted than he was, but which the agent granted him the promise of, because he knew that if the plot succeeded in all details, the pledge would not be claimed. Vassilio himself, half crazed as he was by the scenes of the afternoon, was beset with a fierce desire to build his fortune on the ruin of his foes'. The King dead and him-

¹ The Christian name of the Russian Minister at Zarilov.

self in power, he thought, might turn the tide with Ilona.

"The question of the Cabinet is yet unsettled," said Petrovich, the lawyer. "What has been said of the list made out by me and sent to Petersburg?"

"Nicolaieff Feodorovitch received to-day a reply in cipher from the Chief of the Asiatic Department,"¹ answered Levisohn, who had seen the Russian Minister secretly since noon. "He said that this demand could not be agreed to; that 'at the moment of taking the direction of the kingdom, the Ministry will not be formed of persons belonging to different political parties, but of persons who shall have previously declared that they are ready to fulfil the requirements of the Imperial Government formulated by General Baron Kaulbars.'"²

"That shall be seen to without delay," said Varescu. "The foremost consideration is to choose the hands to be employed in the matter of Fokshany and the Usurper, Waldemar."

"Let us vote a ballot," suggested Levisohn, "and find out who is fittest in the majority's opinion! Then we can take counsel with Nicolaieff Feodorovitch, and finally negotiate with the persons fixed upon."

While the ballots were being counted and noted by Stojan and Leonti, Levisohn continued, as if under the impulse of a new idea:

"The *coup d'état* might well take place on the night of the National Day of Mourning instituted last year by the Usurper himself in memory of Kossovo. There are yet two weeks to mature all plans in and to designate the executioners. On that night let Waldemar and his Premier end their lives, but with as little stir as may be; and in the morning Zarilov

¹ The Asiatic Department comprises Russia's relations not only with Asia, but with Turkey and all her former dependencies.

² Vide "Svoboda" of Sofia, 7th July 1892.

will find itself in the hands of the Provisional Government. General Bagrianoff, being summoned as soon as justice has been done on the Usurper, will ride into the city before dawn, and place himself at the head of affairs in the Czar's name. The command of the army should be Captain Andrassy's, and that of the city, Risoff's. There is not a man in the present Cabinet who could resist a *coup d'état*, except the Premier, and he will be gone to his account. On the other hand, Nelaguine, our Ambassador at Constantinople, will support us there. The priests preach Russia's greatness, magnanimity, and friendship secretly throughout the land, in their constant contact with the peasants, and that has prepared the way: Stroimir himself, who will owe everything to *Him*, will be the greatest Russophile of all."

While the plotters were arranging, some to sell their country, some to buy her, and crediting the great and simple Haiduk with motives venal and rapacious as their own, and while Varescu and Levisohn were concealing from the Alberian conspirators some further plans, to be achieved should the main plot succeed (including the suppression of the dangerous tool Andrassy¹), which were for Russian ears alone, the votes were cast and counted.

For Fokshany's assassin the majority was found to have elected the fierce Arch-priest Stojan. Then Vassilio started and grew paler than before, his eyes fixed fast on calm Leonti.

"The Arch-priest Stojan for the Premier," read the Greek, "and Captain Andrassy for the King."

¹ As in the case of Major Panitza, who was doomed even had his plot succeeded.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PROCESSION OF THE DODOLA

“The rose, as thou knowest, has but a little lifetime, and the season of roses is very soon gone past. . . . That which is not allotted, the hand cannot reach, and what is allotted will find thee wherever thou abidest.”—SAADI.

THE thirty days of grace allowed to Sima would be past before another sun had risen. So certain was the Papst about his doom, that the whole valley now began to mourn him. As evening neared, the people came to watch his end and ask his blessing, all in turn conducted by the fat Popadia, whom worry was fast making lean. The men had cast away their head-gear, and, as at a funeral, wore an air of tragic grief; they also took to drinking, as the custom is, and sang most doleful threnodies. The women, in several cases amongst the least good-looking of them, had turned their garments inside out to show to what a pitch of self-neglect grief had reduced them: at times, too, one, shrieking, would lift up the death-wail, when all, in and out of the house, would respond. The Popadia herself was not backward in howling, so worn had grown her nerves; she now remembered, with remorse, how she had taunted the poor martyr on the subject of his bacon. Sima lay flat on his back on the bed, his hands clasped piously in prayer across his bosom: all these testimonies pleased him well, and gave him courage for the fatal hour.

It was sunset, the girls' time for a gossip at the well, the men's time for leaving their day's labour or their cattle; but to-day there was no loitering by the water-jars, nor laughing at the table. There was not a cheerful face to meet in the length of the valley, except Lazar's; and the old wolf chuckled to himself, "This may teach him to declare that honest men like me spew toads and evil spirits!" All the rest were heavy-hearted, making haste to Sima's house, and bringing with them humble gifts and offerings meant to please the Papst and to propitiate the Ikon. Now the gospel of peace and love which he had lifelong preached as pastor of the valley, the simple glorious gospel of the heart which he had felt and lived, grew fruitful. All the village folk flocked to receive his final blessing, as the sheep to a kind shepherd's hand: women he had married brought the children he had blessed in baptism to his bed; sons carried aged fathers he had visited and cheered with hopeful words for this world and the next; husbands conducted wives whom he had bidden think of Christ's sweet mother Mary as their time approached, or comforted, when one of their so hard-won treasures passed beyond their keeping, with the solemn tender hope of days to be; youths who had been placed as pupils in his house, to serve the Papst as menials and learn from him how to decipher the old Sclavonic missals; girls he had counselled and rebuked, yet often shielded from their elders' anger; even the mountain shepherds, leaving their katoun or summer tent, came to his side. Sima himself lay prone in prayer, or stretched his hands aloft to bless those who desired his benediction; candles were burning at his feet as at a shrine, and also before the Ikon.

Dusk fell, dark followed, and the stars came out: the Popadia broke down and wept.

"Thou'lt never need more bacon now," she sobbed;

"and I remember that the last thou hadst in health I burnt on purpose!"

"I forgive thee, Militza: thou art but only woman, after all. Thou many a time hast fried it faithfully and well—and then I crossed thee when I took thee for a vampire."

Just at the moment a woman without raised the death-wail. The Popadia replied with dolorous howls, made bitter by his magnanimity. Several came in to see if he had passed away as yet, then once more knelt to get a blessing. This set moving a procession of those who watched and camped in the sultry night outside. Sima sat up.

"Hark, sons and daughters; brothers, hark! My mortal hours are few and miserable. Once I had a heart that loved ye all, but now 'tis gone: I die ashamed, without my entrails. It is the Ikon's will and the True God's, though I have piteously prayed against it; and, lying on my bed, the thought has come to me that I am sacrificed to save the valley. Our fathers have taught that the plague-spectres, white-veiled and wan, are sent by God from distant lands when men grow wicked; thus too, perhaps, I am selected unawares as fatted lamb of sacrifice. What, women! wail when I have done, not now; ye are but howling in the wilderness!"

"Ay, but where shall I get another husband kind as thou?" shrieked the Popadia. "Live, Sima! Never mind the Ikon—he is bloodthirsty to want a sacrifice. Live, and we will roast for our own sins, and all time too—but live, and do not leave me!"

"Hush! this is carnal," said the Papst. "Consider! I shall be a glorious martyr! Thou, Militza, wilt kneel when we shall meet on high, and say, 'On earth he was my husband.'"

All the women burst out crying, and the children, willing-throated, swelled the doleful noise. Sima

felt mixed cowardice and courage, with an almost pleasant sense of solemn self-importance.

"The hour," he said, "the hour draweth nigh—the damned hag ate it somehow before dawn. Collect yourselves, now, daughters; come! fie! what! Collect yourselves—and listen."

Those in the room grew quiet, and the lamentations ceased outside. All who could find place came in, and others, pressing forward, filled the doorway.

"If," began Sima, mechanically patting himself upon the stomach as of old, "the Ikon has deemed me a worthy sacrifice for you, as the ram was heaven-sent instead of Isaac, I am—yes, I hope I am—content. I am proud, if not quite happy—for indeed it is a horrid way to die. . . ." He felt a qualm, and shut his eyes and shuddered, upon which the Popadia began howling: "'Tis upon him—!" "Nay," replied the Papst, his fat face tallow-pale, "not yet. . . ." He manned himself. "Heed, now: I am passing from amongst ye; I have always done my best to spite the devil and his fiends; therefore I wish to see ye saved at last, and all my dreadful end not wasted. . . . If the Ikon had seen fit to find another means—" He quavered. "But no! for I shall shine a blessed martyr! . . . Hark, again: ye have offended Heaven and the Saint, and yet I see no huge iniquities. Look into your hearts, and if you find nefarious or heinous thoughts and wishes, root them out. Should there be no scarlet sins to purge of, it needs must be your quarrels that have brought this judgment down. Therefore, before—before what's coming, I want to reconcile ye all in love and peace."

All faces fell; the eyes of enemies met, stealing each a look towards the other; those who had offended wore a sudden air of guilt, while those who had been injured glowed self-righteous.

"Maidens," said Sima, "hug not vanity, for sallow envy is its end. Youths, grow up as brothers, and your generations shall be spared the curse of strife. Men and women of the valley, speak and think no ill, and thus ill-doing also shall be ended. Those who have offended are forgiven, and those who are offended shall forgive. Mercy and love, the keys of heaven upon earth, the keys of peace's paradise, I leave you. . . . Let us pray," said the Papst. He pointed to the ancient Ikon, in whose dim face smoked the candles of the shrine. All knelt, heads bent; the Popadia flung herself before the Saint, imploring mercy.

Midnight by the stars. The men had finished drinking and droning out their mournful minor songs; one by one, the strooka round their heads, they had lain down and gone to sleep, each adding his rude quota to the snoring. The women had fretted themselves quiet, the death-wail no longer rang and raved along the valley; they had huddled together in groups, like roosting hens, and dropped off to sleep between a whisper and a murmur. Sima was composed upon his back, his hands still joined for prayer although he was unconscious; and the fat Popadia, her face wet with the tears which ever slipped between her eyelids, sat asleep before the Ikon, her weary head upon her knees.

Morning! dew-gemmed, bird-sung, flower-scented morning! The sleepers stirred, and dreams' bright webs wore thin. One woke, and, remembering, went at once into the house; he stumbled over many in the darkness, and aroused them. The candles had burnt down before the Ikon and the bed, and guttered out in greasy odours.

"Who's there?—What's this?—Thieves! Witches! Murder!" a voice shouted. "Help! a vampire!"

"Sima! Oh, not dead!"

The sleepers in the house rushed out to waken those beyond. The Papst was throttling, for the fat Popadia had cast herself upon his neck.

"Sima, now thou shalt know how I value thee!—now I will make up to thee for all my stubbornness! Alive! I'll burn fresh candles to the Ikon—blessed Saint!—who gave thee back thy heart. And thou, Sima—thou, my slaughtered lamb, my staff, my precious dove that art alive again!—oh, I will cook thee the most toothsome dish of bacon thou hast ever dreamed of, for thy breakfast!"

The breakfast of the Papst revived was made a feast throughout the valley: only Lazar scowled and grinned, thinking Sima not half punished for his toads and evil spirits. Now the people could attend to the feasts just falling in the end of sultry storm-ridden July: the three great Saints of the weather, Panteleimon, Mary, and Elias. These were the Storm-saints, for rain may be prayed for, but storms are in the keeping of the highest Holy Ones; Elias, whose ascension is recorded in the Scriptures, is the Slavonic Thor, and called "The Thunderer"; fiery Mary darts the lightnings, while mighty Panteleimon lords the tempests. No rain had fallen, and the harvests were in danger, as is often the case through either drought or violent storms, so the people determined to pray for rain with the Procession of the Dodola.

First the most beautiful girl in the village was chosen, and the choice fell on Bosilika. No Mara now, thought the little coquette, to rob her of the Rose of Beauty! Then Loubitza and one or two more housewives helped to make her ready for the rite: her customary coquetries of bead and kerchief were replaced by those of meeter bud and flower. In the dusk of the chambers, wajat or clijet, which were built about the central room, the girl slipped off gar-

ment by white garment till she stood like Aphrodite rising from the foam. Then, while she, bashful, glanced about and blushed and trembled, the matrons clothed her all in leaves, long grasses, herbs, and flowers. Thus, like a wood-nymph caught and carried forth in triumph, she went with her companions through the valley's thirsty length. Loubitza, as she left the threshold, flung some drops of water on her as a symbol of the rain; the people, following, chanted the rain-prayer, led by Guamar's glorious voice.

"Tako mi, Suntza! Tako mi, Semlje!" they shouted, invoking the sun and the moon, with that dependence on the hidden powers of nature which man feels when heart to heart with her, alone. On passed the Dodola, a flower amongst flowers; the rest followed, certain of gaining their object.

"White cloud, go thou forward,
Bedew the green hillside,
Weep soft on the vine-leaves,
Rain fresh on the tall corn!
Outspeed the procession,
The Dodola bids thee!"

they chanted, joyous with new hope. Guamar's voice rose jubilant aloft as mating throstle's, for he also hoped anew.

At every door the housewife sprinkled water on the Dodola, as symbol of the long-desired rain; and Bosilika laughed from the midst of the flowers, and ran on faster than before. Children clapped hands at the sight; old men blessed her; the husbandman earnestly prayed as she passed; there were crones and hags who muttered how they had been Dodola, too, in summers gone and long forgotten.

The procession wound away, as Queen Kralize's train had done, but now the boughs were thick with fruit, not bloom. Earth's broad lap was full of gifts

and plenty; henceforth they would gather in the bounty of the year.

"Tako mi, Suntza! Tako mi, Semlje!" echoed far voices the breeze carried back.

"O white cloud, rain softly,
Rain light on the tall corn,
Rain fresh on the vine-leaves!"

the singers replied.

When evening came, rain fell at last in the valley.

"The Ikon hath heard us!" Sima cried, and rubbed his hands.

"'Tis all the Ikon now, and not the Devil!" muttered Lazar, in whose house the Papst and Stroimir were sitting: the old wolf was a trifle readier to snarl than ever, since the going of his grandson.

Guamar was whispering to Bosilika. Both their young heads, bright and dark, bent, close together, above her tangled distaff.

"I am going to work for thee, Bosa," he said, "and Maxim has consented. When this journey is over, if I live, I shall come back to claim thee: wilt thou welcome me, sweet one? Tell me, am I or rude Miloutim dearest? I flung him to the earth, all giant though he is, for love of thee! Say, dost thou love me? Thou saidst it once, Bosa, and now I am longing to hear it again. Tell me! Thy lips are a rosebud that uncloses one sweet single petal, and keeps the rest all furled and full of fragrance unavowed, for cruelty. . . . No answer? Not a word? What, not a whisper? To-morrow night I shall be gone!"

Bosilika twisted with one hand her love-lock, and with the other the tangled flax. Guamar caught the second trifier in a grasp which kept its wanton fingers still.

"Promise me, Bosa! promise at last! Before I go, thou must be my betrothed!"

She turned her tawny head away, with a side-glance perverse as her smile ; she could not meet unstirred his burning eyes, and she would not yet entirely surrender. . . . The rain-patter, loud on the roof, grew less, and the Papst began to fidget.

"Though the Ikon is our gracious guardian and guide," said Sima, "yet I love to be at home before the nightfall. . . ."

Stroimir looked up from the embers of Loubitza's cooking-fire, with a glance of pity rather than of scorn. Poor rat, which fears the sky and loves his hole ! the Haiduk would have thought, had he formulated his impression. To love a bed more than the moss ; a roof more than the tuneful tree-tops of the forest ; to fear the night, the mountain thunder-clothed and lightning-crowned ; to see a ghost in every shadow ! Stroimir, with the hardy habits of the haiduk through the summer, when the bands were in the forest, and the hardy habits of the herdsman in the winter, when each man sought the house of his jatatzi, or concealer, regarded Sima, apart from his religious calling, as a nightmare-haunted child.

"I like to get to bed betimes," said Sima cheerfully, "for when you walk, like me, from one end to the other of the valley, twenty times a day, your legs will feel it. Mine are not the same as five-and-twenty years ago, when I married Militza."

"Even so," sneered Lazar, with his thin-lipped and satiric grin, "thou'lt be late enough for once this evening."

"Not if I set out directly," answered Sima, moving uneasily again as if at last he would be going. Lazar and Stroimir had weighty matters to discuss with regard to the call from Kloster Sokol, which had brought down Stroimir and Guamar from the mountains in readiness to start for Zarilov. Sima, however, was pleasantly settled with a roof between him and

the rain, and a drop of raki to comfort his courage, which, combined, induced a loitering fancy.

The lovers were still disentangling the flax: it seemed to be a Gordian knot. The dark head and the bright one still bent close enough for kissing, though the kisses were desired, not enjoyed.

"Perhaps I shall meet him in Zarilov, Bosa: then he shall hear how thou hast listened to his wishes! Say the words—now, before it is too late—" he glanced at Lazar, who was grinning with impatience, and Loubitza, who was sleeping as she sat. "Say it, thou rose of a thousand thorns—and each of them makes thee more precious! Think, Bosa, how I watched over thee, night and day, when we feared for our lives in the valley, after the Gipsy went: canst thou not trust the eye nothing escapes or deceives, the heart nothing can shake with fear, the arm which one thought of thee makes strong as a branch of the forest oak? Answer!"

She looked down, toying with the corner of her gold-barred scarlet apron, a mutinous smile on her lips. How sweet it was to hear him pleading!

"But then," she said at last, "suppose I care for Miloutim?"

"The rain has stopped," said Lazar to the Papst, "so now thou wilt be able to be going. If thou'dst like an escort, why, I'll send the wench to see thee safely forward," he added, with uncomprehended sarcasm.

"Nay," said Sima, "I must hurry quickly on, lest the Popadia should grow uneasy." He drained his drinking-cup, and got upon his legs; the fear of loss had made the couple quaintly draw together. "Sbogon! God be with you!" cried the little Papst, and finally stumped out of doors.

"Miloutim waits with the band until the plot's result is known," muttered Stroimir, low, to Lazar.

"Guamar takes his place beside me. If any failure—any calamity—occurs, he is charged to help my son escape beyond the frontier, to await another opportunity. But the True God will not permit it . . . vengeance must be granted for the death of Vlastimir! . . . Yet, base usurper though he is, I had rather meet him front to front in battle!"

The Haiduk stirred the ashes with his foot: he loathed the thought of stealthy murder. Suddenly a roar was heard which greatened till it ended in a mighty pounding on the door.

"Lazar! Lazar! Open! Open, in the name of the True God!"

"Fiends of the Devil!" the old wolf snarled. "Art thou back again already?"

"Come out!" gasped the Papst. "It is there in the heavens—it glares! it flashes! it hath a tail! Come out, for I doubt but my eyes are bewitched, unless a man no imp's torment has seen it!"

Lazar rushed forth, with Loubitza, just out of her sleep, in a panic beside him. Stroimir, a strange premonition cold at his marrow, followed them slowly. Bosilika had just said the words Guamar desired, at last, without warning; and the betrothed, she shrinking from the solid wall of night against his breast, ran out together.

"Our fathers cursed thee," groaned Sima, puffing loudly with his haste and his alarm combined. "Thou devil-star, avaunt from these our peaceful heavens of the valley! Thou vampire of the skies, begone! Thou guilty, bloody, monstrous spectacle, I ban thee! Flee, demon-born! Hence, hence! Bringer of pestilence, war, and death, explode! expire! vanish!"

He shook two trembling fingers at a mighty comet blazing in the north, and poured a flood of old Sclavonic exorcisms forth, sonorous as an organ-blast.

But the sign upon the brow of night remained, weird, clothed in its appalling shroud of fire. The rest shuddered closer to each other, like dumb beasts which look upon a fearful wonder. Stroimir alone faced the portent, cold to the soul with his life's first fear.

"It is an omen, hanging there above Zarilov," he muttered. "God have mercy on our souls! It is the Bale-star!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

MIRAGE

"You are more stubborn than destiny. But love will pierce bronze, or adamant itself ; mine shall pierce you.

"What I had pursued so ardently, in one moment turned to ashes in my hand."—JAMES ARTHUR MACKNIGHT.

IN the month which had passed since the death of Gadatz, whose funeral the King had celebrated with high observance, to the chagrin of Fokshany, Ilona had found a thousand opportunities to soothe and comfort Waldemar. Every day she seemed to draw him nearer, bind him faster, in the fetters of an influence himself but half-acknowledged ; an influence which had not the magic and spontaneous power of affinity, but whose force was in supreme tact, in eternal vigilance, in passion so strong as to be almost magnetism. Her puissance lay in that sympathy which sees where even Reason stumbles blind.

The King attended a midnight commemorative service on the date which, a month before, had marked at once Gadatz's death and his own birthday. The glorious choral celebrations of the Greek Church soothed him as only music and the voice of Fredegonde had ever had the power to ; the over-wrought fibre in him which, at times, meant madness, found an intimate intense relief, a complex and acute sensation of supreme enfranchisement, in these sweet soaring harmonies. His spiritual forces, jarred by the world

and tortured by regret, were loosed by song's power on him from the heavy burden of conscious personality : thus liberated, they restored themselves as no other outward influence enabled them to do, and being soothed were strengthened. Music with him was an emotion.

Next evening, Ilona, faint with the heat no storm had come to freshen, kept her own apartments : she sat on her balcony, gazing away to the moonlit plain and married rivers. Within, the lights were low ; a lamp like a ruby twinkled at the Ikon's feet ; there was a subtle scent of roses. Ilona's thoughts were with the gathering below, in the great saloon of the Konak. Had he come yet, for his customary hour with the court ? that interminable hour which she and Andrassy always used to try and shorten for him. . . . At the thought of Vassilio, her hands clenched. Coward ! coward, again !—how dared he say it ?

"I will punish him for it," she muttered. "I will watch till I find a way. So he curses the name of his King, his friend, his protector, as he thinks I curse the name of Fredegonde ? . . . he *knows*, for love like his is second-sighted." She pulled a rose from several hanging at her bosom, and began to tear it petal from sweet petal. Suddenly a counter-impulse seized her : she pressed the fragrant thing half-ruined to her lips.

"Perfume, music, poesy, beauty, all the delicate delights of life ; all the baits of fortune, all the boons of fate, all that the world has coveted and worshipped since the birth of man, what are they without love ? The sun is dark, and music dumb, and poesy a name, when love is wanting ! Lord of the soul, its highest blessing, hugest curse, without which mild content may be, but not winged happiness ! Passion most ennobling, comprehensive, and almighty ; most misconceived, debased by vulgar devotees, mis-

prized ; but in its royal seldom-seen perfection, how sublime, how beautiful, how near divine ! ”

She sighed, one of those profoundest sighs of infinite sadness, which ease the laden heart, and yet half break it. Tears were in her eyes, and fell upon the ruined rose, a dew which matched its leaves' bruised beauty. . . . Suddenly her heart leapt, and she started up. A knock ! Could her intense desire to see him there beside her, hear his voice, breathe air his breath had mixed with, feign that he looked love into her eyes, have, spell-like, brought him ? Could their souls already be connected by the subtle and magnetic bond of sympathy ? . . . Thought passed through her brain like lightning : action followed. She crossed the room and opened the door.

It was Waldemar.

“ I came to ask if you are better,” he said, smiling as he entered. “ I have just now finished with the court—for this evening at least.”

“ You are tired,” she said eagerly, showing that blending of deference and sweet authority which marked her conversation with the King. “ It was too good of you to think of me : it is you who need *my* care, King Waldemar.”

He had advanced into the room.

“ You always seem so cool here : downstairs the heat is stifling with all those lights,” he said. “ My eyes were aching, but this dusk relieves them. . . . Tears, Countess ! What ! you have been weeping ? ”

He interrupted himself to exclaim. The atmosphere changed in a second, and grew charged with emotional electricity. She, at the word, broke down and sobbed as if her heart was breaking.

“ What is it, Ilona ? What do you mean ? Have I pained you ? ” murmured the King. He was bending above her, she half-swooned in her chair, her face hidden in her hands on its low back.

"How can I tell him," she thought, "that it is he—that I am dying for him? . . ." The immense need which loving woman feels at times to lean upon the strength of the beloved, to hear kind words, to ask protection, from the one her heart acknowledges as first on earth for her, came irresistibly to Ilona. "Forgive me, forgive me!" she whispered brokenly, seeking an excuse which would assist and not betray her. "Scenes in the past come back at times, and haunt one till they seem to have occurred but yesterday, driving one half-mad with their insistence. . . ."

"Yes, I know," said Waldemar slowly. His thoughts went back to the hour when, meeting Theodosi at Fredegonde's chamber-door, he had heard the answer: "Sire, she is dead."

"What I have loved," said Ilona, suddenly impetuous, "has always been my sorrow. I loved my mother, a beautiful woman, mild and mournful as a saint, whose life for years was martyrdom under my father's tyranny: her face shines out upon a background of deep woods and hoary castle in my memory. She died. I was just entering my girlhood. Had she lived, I should have become a better woman."

Waldemar seated himself beside her.

"Why do you speak of this? Have you not told me we must leave the past and all its wrecks behind, and press towards the future?"

"Ah, but *you* never forget—?" Her burning eyes were fast upon him.

"No," said the King, that lofty look upon his face which one thought brought there. "I can not forget."

"*Oubliez! oubliez! c'est le secret de la vie!*" Life's secret is forgetfulness!" cried Ilona. "If I could forget . . . make memories die as men do . . . I—" she stopped. Was she going mad? She had

almost said, "I should fly from here to-night, and leave behind me every thought of you and of this long accursed year, which has been twenty years of pain!" She paled. Was she losing control upon herself?

"The secret of pleasure, not of power," said Waldemar. "Not of true greatness nor true goodness."

"Ah, but idealists are few," she cried, "and those who suffer many! Who can think of the ideal when hot iron sears his eyes out? Who can dream of the ideal when he is blind with love or hate?"

"Countess Ilona," said the King, "you are not well. Let me send for Theodosi." He rose. In a second she was at his side, her eager fingers on his arm, her face uplifted.

"No, King Waldemar—no, no! To talk with you a little does me more good than a hundred soothing-draughts. Humour me—pet me—forgive me . . . sometimes we women so much need—and prize— forbearance!"

The King felt a second's surprise: her tears were gone, as if the fire of her eyes had scorched them dry; her cheeks glowed, she was beautiful as Lamia in the fragrant half-light of the room. It seemed to him as if, standing beside him, she waited for him to stretch arms out and take her, passion-vanquished, to his breast. . . . Waldemar moved, half-dazed, as if to break the spell, and wondered at his own brain's fantasy. . . . They took their seats again. She sighed—the sigh which follows a great effort or a great emotion.

"And so you loved your mother," said the King, "and lost her?" He was saddened by a memory of his own.

"Yes," said Ilona. "She was my life's good angel, and I lost her at my life's beginning. Girlhood is the threshold of a woman's life, the gate of danger,

happiness, despair, and all fruition: since I was fifteen I have only had the memory of that sweet white face and whiter hand to point me upward."

"My mother died a year after my birth," said Waldemar. "She was my father's cousin, and—went—mad. . . ." He gazed ahead of him as if he saw the spectre of his house approaching in the shadows. His clear-cut face was stony in its aspect of intense dread and endurance. . . . Ilona softly took his unresisting hand, and pressed it to her lips and to her bosom.

"King Waldemar," she murmured, "do not think of that. For my sake!—I suffer so in seeing you unhappy. . . ."

The King roused from his bitter reverie, and found a tear dropped, pearl-like, on his hand.

"Thank you for your wish to comfort me," he answered, with deep feeling. "Since Gadatz's death, life has sometimes taxed me almost beyond my powers. . . ."

The old physician's name stung Ilona: her mood changed. Still Gadatz! Still Fredegonde! In the surcharged emotional atmosphere existing, she wavered like a fire which blazes and then fails.

"You have suffered, King Waldemar," she said, her voice almost metallic in its hardness. "But you have not seen such scenes as I. You are a man, and have seen men die, but I, a woman, saw a woman murdered."

Waldemar turned on her in horror. She answered his look and gesture with a glance of recklessness.

"After such a sight, one cannot be the same; it leaves a scar upon the soul. In those eternal seconds I was changed from girl to heart-worn woman: the passions which glared lightning-like and dazzled my pure sight, have left me, I sometimes think, half-blinded. . . . We were at dinner in the castle: my

father and his beautiful young wife sat opposite each other; the servants had retired. He had married the loveliest girl in Buda-Pesth a year after my mother's death, and was savagely jealous of her from the first; he suspected her of infidelities. . . . I remember how she was eating a peach as delicately flushed as her own cheeks, smiling as she cut it with the gold fruit-knife which caused the tragedy. He taunted her suddenly, unmindful of my presence. She smiled. He taunted her again. She flushed, but went on playing with the peach. The third time, he flung across a foul name with the taunt—and like a flash her knife flew back and struck him on the forehead. It had drawn blood! He stood up for a moment, with the red stream hideous on his face already hideous with fury; and then, that knife in his hand, he came and stabbed her to death before my eyes. . . . There was not a sound—he had her by the throat—and though he must have struck her twenty blows, I could not stir or think till all was over. . . . It would be different now: my nerves are tried and steeled to violence and surprise—my past has been too terrible a lesson. . . . The murder got out through a servant's flight with the news from the accursed castle; but when the law's ministers appeared, they found my father only as a corpse. He, too, was dead by violence: I looked upon his face as well as hers. He had put the mouth of his pistol to the cut made by her knife. . . .”

There was silence then.

“Why do you tell me things like this, which must be a crucifixion to you?” murmured Waldemar, appalled and oppressed; his hands were trembling.

“Because your sympathy is so precious to me,” she answered eagerly. “You know me as a woman without cares, except those of light-hearted vanity in talk and self-adornment; as one who lives for the

day alone; as one who loves no being, perhaps, besides herself: but that is my mask to the world's eyes, and not my heart's face to my friends. . . . Do not believe that this is all of me, this trivial side for vulgar eyes to stare at: I can only be hurt by those I love; and if you think me thus, I shall be wounded to the death! I am faulty enough—"

"But not for me," said Waldemar. "You nursed me, cared for me when—She was absent. . . ."

"No gratitude, King Waldemar—or I shall know you thought my office was a burden, not my joy, my consolation!" she cried, pricked where she felt acknowledgment instead of passion's touch or love's. "At least I helped to call you back to life," she hurried on, afraid of having said too much. "To others I seem to have been fatal: three times bloodshed has appalled me in my home."

"Three times!" said Waldemar. "Three times!"

"My husband," she answered, and then paused. "He was found in the armoury, dead, with a half-cleaned pistol in his hand. . . . I have sometimes, shuddering, wondered if it is my fate to bring a tragic end to those who love me—and to those I love."

"Horrible!" muttered the King. "I do not believe in bonds of fate and destiny," he added. "Circumstances influence, but never need control us. We can always do what is the right."

"Then you disregard also those mysterious suggestions, risen from the heart of the nations and the depths of prehistoric time, which attribute strange properties of fortune or ill-fortune to objects, like the opal, without life; which invest man with powers like the evil eye; and which suggest the spiritual world's occult continual influence on the world of matter?"

"That," answered Waldemar, "belongs to another range of thought. . . . If I did not believe in the

ideal—the spiritual, in the widest, highest, best sense of the term—I should not live another day. Life is an unendurable enigma; let us hope death will surrender us its key.”

Ilona leaned towards him, flushed, seductive as Venus, a smile on her lips.

“King Waldemar, you are young. Why do you think of life and death, but never—love?” He glanced up, startled, and met her eyes. By an impulse neither understood, both rose. “Why do you look to the past?” she cried, her hands outstretched to him in eager supplication. “Why do you curse life and pass it by, when it is full of treasures? One hope is dead of all the band, and you became a slave to black despair! One flower is dead—one, one!—and you forget the summer’s myriads! There is no use in anything but happiness, the golden butterfly which fills the air with light. . . . Waldemar, do you not know how I love you?” she whispered, bowing her proud head.

The King stood frozen. Fokshany’s words rushed back on memory; they blazed upon him like the writing on the wall. Ilona loved him!—and he?

“I know how good and great you are,” she murmured. “You will not despise me, as a lower soul might, because I have forgotten all but love. . . .”

“Despise you, Ilona? No,” said Waldemar, his voice profoundly sad. “But I despise myself.”

“You, Waldemar! You, who are so noble that your love would lift me far above myself, and make me grow, I think, half angel? How often I have longed to gain the precious privilege of helping you on with your chosen work, aiding you on in your chosen way, being faithful guardian and humble slave to one whom I adore as only loving woman can do! No task that you could set me I would not perform,” she cried, unconsciously repeat-

ing the words Andrassy had used to move herself in his despair. "No labour of yours too hard for me to help you carry through ; no purpose of yours too high for my heart ; no burden of yours too heavy for my shoulders. When we love, the beloved is our God, and we burn our very souls as incense gladly. My life is yours—it is here at your feet—to do with as you will. . . . Waldemar, Waldemar, mercy ! I love you so utterly ! Do not send me away !"

There was silence for a breath's time, denser for her last vibrating cry. She had seen what made her despair in his face as she sank at his feet and asked for mercy.

"Ilona, why do you speak to me of love?" exclaimed the King, imploring her to rise. "You know that I have loved once and forever—now and to eternity." He was cursing the egotism of grief, the selfish blindness which had helped him to mislead her. What use, he thought, to labour, suffer, and aspire, if, self-engrossed, he kept the vigil dreaming and not watching? A hundred stabs of pity, deep regret, sharp self-contempt, met piercing in his soul.

"Love is not dead because one gift he gave is broken !" she cried, her passionate lips upon his hand. "Could I be here if love were not omnipotent ? I love you more than pride or life itself !"

"Ilona, rise !" said the King, unconsciously attempting to control her by his royal privilege. "I will not allow you to implore my love when I can only give you pity."

. . . She was on her feet, and trembling bodily with passion—hate, pure hate, not love.

"Your Majesty shall be obeyed," she said, "for I am not accustomed to men's *pity*."

A moment passed. They stood confronted ; he with doubt, contrition, pain, and almost yearning in

his eyes ; she, with Satan's pride in eye and nostril, breathing hate, defiance, vengeance. . . . Love was dead.

He left her, full of self-reproach, self-scrutiny, resolved to bind life's burden faster, watch more, work more, discipline himself still more austere. She, once alone, flung herself upon the floor, and writhed there like a snake trampled and dying.

CHAPTER XXIX

A DAUGHTER OF EVE

"Une femme, depuis Eve, a toujours fait sciemment le bien et le mal."—HONORÉ DE BALZAC.

ANOTHER July day, arriving at the sultry hour before the thunderstorm which daily cooled the city. Zarilov was sleeping, to its lowest ebb; the white streets and white houses blazed with sunshine.

"Do you remember how you said you could not live without my love; that you would die for it—or kill for it? . . . I wonder how much of that was true. I have called you back to-day to see, Vassilio."

Had the black week never dragged its length away for him, or brought the day which meant despair and more than this for her, and were they still trifling with the golden dice and dreaming of a golden future? . . . She spoke his Christian name for the first time, and he started, as a dog does when he hears his master call him, with glad interrogation in his eyes. Before she could check him he flung himself at her feet, and her imprisoned hands were branded with his kisses.

"Ilona! you will listen to me, then? . . . My God, I am going mad!"

He looked it, wild with the joy of hope after despair, of soul's life after death. His ardent eyes were on her face as if hope, life, light, happiness,

his all, were there. She smiled with indulgence ; the smile of a woman who knows her power, but has mercy.

"Yes, I called you back to-day, Vassilio, because I knew I had been cruel. You stabbed me in my only vulnerable spot, and I became beyond myself. . . . Ah, how I loathe my weakness !" She glanced away, as if she could no longer meet his eyes.

"What weakness ?" His aquiline eager face set suddenly, became a rigid mask of vigilance.

"My passion—for . . . "

"For him ? For the King ?" muttered Andrassy, his voice suppressed until it seemed a whisper.

"For Waldemar," murmured Ilona tenderly, lingering on the name.

Vassilio sprang back with a curse.

"Did you bring me here to tell me how you love my rival ? . . . I would go through death and hell to win you, but I will not go through that !"

"Forgive me," said Ilona softly—she was mournful and subdued, a mood in which till now he had not seen her. "I do not wish to pain you. . . . It was because I suffer so myself. . . ."

He stood before her, controlling himself till his lips grew white, and the veins swelled on his temples.

"It is useless for me to remain, then," he said. He could scarcely make his tongue pronounce the words.

"Do not be angry," she murmured appealingly, turning her averted face to his. The violet of her tearless eyes, with their expression of profound unhappiness, the pallor of the face whose changes were the pages of his book of life, subdued him like a spell. "You must not go," she said, and motioned to a seat beside her own, "till I have

told you all I wish to. First, I want you to forgive me."

Vassilio's face hardened. In the madness of the hour, her insult had been half-forgotten: not wholly, for Andrassy was too sheer an egotist to forget what related to himself. Ilona, watching him under her lashes, saw the step was false, and also how to turn it to advantage.

"He made me think what I told you," she said.

"What, he—the King?" exclaimed Vassilio.

"Yes. He said that this changed your position in his estimation altogether, and that, as soon as it could be done discreetly, he should put another in your place."

"He said that he would put another in my place?" repeated Andrassy, with that intense gaze which his heavy eyelids made more piercing. His hand was at his lion-hilted sabre.

"Yes," answered Ilona, meeting his eyes with the guileless glance which made men call her angel. . . . There was a pause. She saw him gnaw his lip under his short moustache.

"I wonder," he muttered, "how I can adore you when you love a man I hate as I hate him. . . ."

"Yes," she said pensively. "Had I never met him, I might have cared for you instead." Vassilio's too-speaking face grew black with fury. He had forgotten Fokshany's wise injunction, "You must teach your eye and nostril silence too." She sighed. "But while he lives, I can think only of him. His pure pale spiritual beauty, with its deep reserves of force and fire beneath; his strength in love and purpose; his constancy I would have died to prove; his gracious ways, full of individual charm, which give a woman such sweet glimpses and suggestions of the friend in him—the lover. . . . Ah, no! Till he is dead, no other face can please me. . . . Perhaps, in

the future, he may change, forget his grief . . . and I can wait."

Vassilio was blind with rage. In springing to his feet he overset a Moorish table where the dice-box stood, and flung the golden playthings on the floor.

"Those," he cried, pointing to them, "those told his fortune by your hand a week ago. The King is not long-lived! Perhaps the end may come before you know it!"

Ilona felt that shock and tremor of the nerves which the hunter feels when game long tracked starts up beneath his feet.

"Do you know," she answered, "I have often wished him dead. I have often thought that it would set me free."

"Wished him dead! You? You!" Andrassy stammered, staring at her wildly.

"Yes; for at times I hate him—hate him more than I have ever loved." There was a pause, he thunder-struck, she gathering fire. "I hate him for my love's humiliation, unrecognised and unreturned! I hate him for giving the love of his life to her, when I too am beautiful and lovely! I hate him for worshipping her memory instead of my own living loving presence! I hate him for all I have suffered by him, and first because I love him still!"

"Ilona!"

"Yes, he has an influence upon me which is blinding, maddening. For him I could forget pride, honour; forfeit life and soul—he is my evil genius. Do you think I would have spurned away a love as true as yours, if my reason were not dominated by my rebel heart? Could I sacrifice your fire of passion for the ice of his indifference, willingly? When I am alone I curse him, resolve to break away, to leave the court, the country, pass beyond his daily influence

and fascination. But a look, a turn of his head, a tone of his voice, some little gesture which another would not see, a smile—all the dearer because seldom—a glance, in which I try to read the dawn of love I covet; the least of these is enough to break my resolution, lay me at his worshipped feet again. . . . No, do not curse him," she murmured plaintively, the glow of passion fading from her eyes. "I am not worth the bringing of another sand-grain's weight to the burden which he nobly tries to bear. . . ."

Vassilio stood paralysed with fury as he saw her bow her head upon her arms and weep.

"Ilona, either you or he—one or the other—I shall kill! . . ."

She saw that she had goaded, pricked, and galled him to the brink of action; now he needed the directing hand.

"If it be I," she said, raising her head, and firing him with a dauntless glance, "you will rid me of life's burden, which has grown too heavy for me. If it be he—" the ghost of a smile, which mocked his threat, haunted her lips, "my life's black nightmare will be over. . . . I shall wake to hope and love."

"Were he dead—" breathed Vassilio, himself appalled at love which hated, hate which loved, at his own daring, now she seemed to sanction it, yet fired to frenzy by her words.

"The man who told me he was dead would merit all that I could give him!"

"What, were he his murderer?" the other gasped.

"I should not call it murder!"

The mighty doubt which had weighed him down since Leonti read the plotters' vote, was gone. She looked into his eyes, an intoxicating gaze of promise, triumph, tenderness. On her lips dawned a smile which was pledge of the future—"the future, all light,

all hope, all love!" . . . Vassilio fell at her feet, kissing madly the hands which she abandoned to him.

"And when it is done . . ." he muttered.

"When it is done, you shall take his place!"

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE GREEK CATHEDRAL

“Perdut’ho quel che ritrovar non spero
Dal borea all’ austro, o dal mar indo al mauro.
Tolto m’hai, Morte, il mio doppio tesoro,
Che mi fea viver lieto e gire altero,
E ristorar nol può terra nè impero
Nè gemma oriental nè forza d’auro.”

FRANCESCO PETRARCA.

AN hour before noon, and the Eve of the National Day of Mourning. Mara had left the hot streets of the town for the cool dusk of the Greek Cathedral. There was a standing crowd within, through which she made her way, but the body of the church was empty. A few stalls stood vacant facing the altar, and the girl slipped into one of these: a time-stained narrow plank run through them formed the seat, in contrast with carved backs and arms. Before her, across the space left by the crowd of worshippers, the pavements of mosaic, rose a sumptuous altar-screen formed of pictures set Byzantine-wise in a gold background. As yet no officiant appeared, but from behind this screen, stretching high to the domed roof, harmonious voices sounded; sweet chants full of praise and peace, that filled the space like incense. It was this chorus of clear throats which soothed the King with music's magic influence upon him; Mara closed her eyes and thought she heard the angels sing, her martyred mother's voice amongst them.

The girl was dressed in the holiday costume of the district of Zarilov, with its richly-embroidered skutnik, or apron, petticoat, loose-sleeved blouse, and Turkish jacket; its ample overskirt caught back in paniers; its wrought-silver buckles at the waist, and strings of coins about the neck and arms. She wore a rose in her black hair, not put for coquetry, but as a headdress. Mara had never been happy enough, in life or love, to grow coquettish; and now, with the thought of Maxim far away, Leonti's suit impending, and the King's desire expressed, as Ilona had told her that it was, she grew so moody that her melancholy verged on recklessness. Would it not have been better to accept the prospect of a lifetime passed with Maxim in the valley?—scoffed at, jeered at; a scorned wife, unhonoured mother; called by them all the gipsy bastard till her death; but safe in the arms of the one she loved, not sacrificed to one she hated! . . . The angel voices of the choir soared and fell, like hope which doubts, and doubt which hopes aspiring. Why had life, after her flight, grown first so full, and then so desolately empty? The days of more than two long months had taught her how her heart depended upon Maxim, how his presence had been at once her secret source of joy, and the fountain of her deepest sorrow. Dawn came pale without their early meeting when he brought the wood in and she lit the fire; morning was sad without his kind word at the hour when she milked the cows while he yoked the mild oxen; noontime was lonely with no table to prepare, at which he would be sitting; long afternoon crawled by, sighed slow away, without the hope of his home-coming; sunset's splendour faded unobserved, for it would not see him helping her to carry back the full jars from the well; twilight fell gloomy, since no distaff twirled which he would disentangle; evening sank sullen into night, for the

morning would not bring her greeting in his voice. . . . Mara knelt in the music-haunted dusk, and wept with overwhelming loneliness and longing. What were the cruel words, the blows, the ignominy, hardship, of her life, when she could see his face? Why had she ever left the valley? Now she must submit, and do her duty to the King. But ah, the memory of Maxim's gentleness, of how he prized her and defended her, even stood between her and old Lazar! It roused in her the woman's intimate instinct of dependence, gratitude, admiring love. The volume of voices rolled soaring forth, and the girl's tears dropped like rain.

"Save me, dear Saints! O dear God, save me!" she murmured, broken-hearted. Lost in her memories and fears, she did not hear the music softly ceasing.

A great arched door in the centre of the altar-screen was opened, and Stojan came out, followed by Leonti. They had celebrated the communion within, the Arch-priest offering the chalice to his deacon; and now were about to distribute to the people pieces of the sacred bread. Stojan was clothed in a red velvet alb, worked gorgeously in writhing lines of gold, like splendid serpents; Leonti was majestically coped in cloth of gold, his vestment all of crimson velvet. Mara raised her eyes, and saw him standing in the arch, his sculptured face dead white beside the black of hair and beard: a beautiful picture, in the setting of the gilded temple, with a garment all of gold. A mysterious glimpse of sacred precincts showed beyond; above his head a great gold crucifix gleamed dimly, while a lofty taper burned beside him. He seemed to hesitate, uncertain. . . . Then the blending voices softly ceased, and he rallied and stood forward, in his robes of gold, to distribute the holy bread. The people flocked towards him, and he gave the sacred morsels slowly, three by three: and the

children, for their one piece, kissed his hand. Mara looked at him, despairing: she must come and take her share, but would that he were kind old Sima, in his weather-worn black gown! As she was about to leave her seat, she paused: Leonti reeled, she thought. . . . But no. She watched him with eyes whose keenness no reading nor vigils by the lamp had ever lessened; yes, he looked paler than usual to-day—but his calm face was always white and placid. . . . Suddenly Mara sprang forward. Leonti had let fall the holy bread; he stood, eyes fixed in terror, swaying, with a froth upon his lips. Before she could reach him he collapsed, and fell a writhing heap upon the pavement, gorgeous vestments mingled with the scattered bread, in hideous convulsions.

The people, thunderstruck, rushed forward, some to aid the Papst, some out to spread the news and find a doctor. Women shrieked and children screamed, the choristers came running in, the church became a Babel. Mara, as the first convulsion ceased, was on her knees beside the Greek, and raised him till he rested on her breast. He lifted dying eyes to hers, and muttered, in a voice wretched by the torment at his vitals:

“I am poisoned . . . Stojan . . .”

Useless. The convulsion came again, and flung him from her arms upon the pavement's rich mosaic. Stojan, with his serpent-eyes, was watching him like fate, and ordered the choristers to lift him up between them and carry him within the altar-screen. They tried to do so, but the death-struggle was on him, and he was too strong a man to die at once. . . . Those about him hid their eyes and wrung their hands; the sacred bread was trampled underfoot. Stojan watched him, snake-like, with the fear that he might find a breath to speak with—to accuse with—ere he died. But no . . . cramp on cramp, convul-

sion on convulsion, his lips afroth and bitten through, but mute—still mute. . . . The fate of the plot, of the King, hung on a word, the tortured breath the Greek could hardly draw. Stojan's eyes were fixed upon him, cruel as death, awaiting and welcoming the end. Mara, like a statue, knelt beside him. The thread the kingdom hung upon wore thin.

An instant's quiet, and he tried to speak. The voice came inarticulate, a rattle and a groan. The girl saw him writhe as if to raise himself, and lifted him once more against her breast. Could he pronounce the words that battled to burst forth, as the venom battled with the stubborn life?—"He poisoned me in the sacred wine, for I would have betrayed their plot!" He muttered, "Stojan—" then the spasm wrenched him back, and left him breathless and defeated. He knew the Arch-priest longed to set his heel upon his mouth, and stamp the secret out forever; but what he had drunk from the communion cup had done it better, clenched his rigid jaws as in a vice. The agony of the body which felt the destroyer at its vitals unawares, was less than the torment of the soul within, imprisoned, mute, and impotent. Leonti struggled like a madman, tried with starting eyes and foamy lips to snap the bond. . . . Useless . . . useless! He was suffering, agonising, dying, and no mouth would cry for vengeance. Useless! He was stamped into the earth, like any worm, to writhe and cease and be forgotten. All the strength of youth and of despair, the ferocity of half a lifetime's loss, the rage of pain and vengeance, joined his powers' last rally against fate. He struggled up, endeavouring to speak, blood mixing with the froth upon his bitten lips, his hands outstretched, pointing in the face of Stojan. The crowd fell back, appalled, and Mara trembled to the soul as she crouched watching. Stojan folded his arms across his breast and met the

mute denunciation. . . . With a sound like the last roar of a wild beast in its impotence and fury, pain and death, Leonti rolled in his rich vestments amongst the fragments of the desecrated bread, and then lay still.

People were rushing into the church, some with the doctor, some alarmed, some curious; the waves of the city's life poured in, attracted by the vacuum of death.

"Dead!" the physician said, dropping the clenched and leaden hand whose finger was still pointing.

"Bear him away!" commanded Stojan, who still stood confronted with the corpse.

The doctor rose from his knees as the choristers advanced.

"But what is this?" he said. "A girl—"

His voice was overwhelmed by another, strong and young, the agonising outcry of despair.

"Mara! Mara! . . . Dead!"

Maxim, dusty, haggard, hungry, travel-worn, was on his knees beside her body.

"What, lad! is one corpse not enough?" cried the doctor. "She has only swooned—" But once again his voice went idly by, for Mara found herself in Maxim's arms, and Maxim, after all his love and service, was rewarded.

"Come to the King," said Mara later, as they left the now-accursed church together; she held a withered rosebud in her hand, which he had brought to her from far-off Sokol. "He is like our beautiful St. Jovan in the valley, and will help thee when at last he knows the truth." She was thinking of the marriage with Leonti from which his death had freed her, but of which as yet she dared not speak to Maxim; and in her life's first pure felicity she turned by instinct to the King. They walked along together, hand in hand, she blushing with the rich dusk flush of

gipsy blood, and he keeping faithful steadfast eyes upon her face, as if he feared again to lose her.

"Dare I appear like this before him?" Maxim asked her, looking at his travel-stained old garments. His holiday pistols were gone from his sash: he had sold them during his journey. "I brought a second pair of spunks," he added, "but in walking, both pairs were worn out." He glanced at his leathern sandals. Abruptly Mara stopped, and looked him through.

"Maxim," she said, "in coming, thou hadst, then, no other thought than me?"

"None," he answered, astonished. "What thought should I have but thee to bring me here?"

"Thou hast not come—to hurt the King—to kill him?"

"Kill thy saviour, Mara—!"

"Swear it to me by the True God!" she said.

"I swear it to thee by the True God!"

"Maxim, I am too happy to feel fear; my life is like a springtime tree which bursts forth in a thousand blossoms; and yet—"

"Yet what?" Her solemn tone and gaze fell chill upon his bounding gladness.

"And yet I feel as if misfortune hovered near: not for us, perhaps, but for him."

"The King?"

"Why did Leonti point at the Arch-priest?" she whispered: they had reached the square before the palace, and she stopped, a trembling hand fast in his own. "He said to me, 'I am poisoned . . . Stojan . . .'" and he pointed at Stojan as he died. Jovan was in league with the priesthood here, I know, for I overheard it on that fearful night. . . . Oh, Maxim! dost thou think it means another plot—more bloodshed—and my saviour's death, perhaps?"

Before he could answer, she saw Fokshany descending the steps of the Konak. In her dread, an

impulse seized her to approach him: she told Maxim to remain, and crossed the square. Curtseying low to the Premier, whom she always looked upon with awe, she related the scene in the cathedral and the words Leonti had pronounced before he died.

"What then, girl?" demanded Fokshany, with a faint sneer at her anxious eagerness, and a faint smile at her beauty, for the diplomate had always been a *roué*.

"Perhaps there is a plot against the King—" she murmured, dropping eyes and voice.

"What do you know of plots against His Majesty?" the Premier asked, his glance a-glitter.

Mara remembered her promise to the King, and her fear of Fokshany redoubled. He had spoken in his usual still voice, but his potential sphinx-like face grew sterner. Could he force her to confess about the former conspiracy, if he suspected? . . . Mara, embarrassed, murmured, "I know nothing, Excellence; I only wondered—was afraid—" A minute later she had curtseyed low, retired, and rejoined Maxim.

"I shall concentrate more forces in the capital," Fokshany thought, "against to-morrow. The telegraph and train will bring a couple of regiments here within a dozen hours. Strange . . . I must speak to Voukovich. . . ." (the chief of the secret police). "It may be some of these accursed Panslavists, though God forbid!—and mischief of the kind is often planned to happen on a day of public ceremonial like to-morrow."

Mara, on petitioning to see the King, found he was ailing and confined to his apartments. She told the story of Leonti's death to Ilona, but with hesitation: her acute and semi-savage instinct, doubly intense through long ill-usage, had never allowed her to depend upon the friendship of the Countess as she did on that of Waldemar.

"Do you think that it could mean a plot against the King?" asked Mara, with her sombre and mysterious eyes fixed full on Ilona. The other paled: was this accursed foundling going to guess and foil the plot? "Would you not send him a message—a warning?" pursued the girl, with troubled eagerness. "If I could make signs on paper, as Sima used to teach the youths to—but I never learned. . . . Think! his enemies may kill him, just for want of that one little word!"

"Are you mad?" cried Ilona sharply. "What has set you raving of plots and enemies? Who told you that the King has enemies? Who spoke to you of plots?"

They stood confronted, hawk and dove, the blonde woman's relentless dauntless eyes ablaze and searching out the other's secret.

"I was afraid . . ." murmured Mara. "No one had spoken of them, but I was afraid . . ."

"Come, child," laughed Ilona, changing her tone, though her teeth were clenched while she smiled. "The King is safe in his palace, with all his soldiers and servants about him. Not a soul could hurt him if they would. Do not fear. No plot, if there were one, could succeed. Do not talk like that to other people, mind, for they would call you mad, and the King himself would become angry. Wait here till I return."

Ilona threw a scarf of lace about her head, and passed into the shady palace-garden. Vassilio joined her, as they had agreed he should do if she walked there.

"She can know nothing of the truth," he said. "Keep her quiet, close to you, until to-morrow night, and then . . ."

"And then," murmured Ilona, her tone an intangible caress, "you will show me how you love me. . . ."

When she returned, she heard voices, she thought, and paused. The murmur reached her ear articulate.

"Guard him! Keep him! Save him! He is so kind and patient, so gentle, so strong, so noble, so forgiving! Let me bear the cross, instead of him! Who could hate him, if they knew his heart as I do? full of love for all, even for me, who am unworthy. . . . He taught me to love, and to forget revenge; only to love—and yet they hate him! He saved my life: if the Saint would take it in place of his precious life, how happy I should be. . . . Save him! Watch over him! Keep him! In the name of the True God!"

Ilona softly entered, trembling and moved, her resolution shaken. Mara was prostrate before the Ikon, where the ruby shrine-lamp gleamed.

CHAPTER XXXI

JUDAS

"The moving finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety and Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it."

OMAR KHAYYÂM.

THE National Day of Mourning, appointed by the King in memory of those who fell on cursed Kossovo, dawned sultry, sullen, menacing with unborn storm. Services were sung in the Greek Cathedral; the Metropolitan himself officiating, surrounded by priests in splendid vestments, where Leonti died the day before. The Greek's death was ascribed to natural causes, his funeral hastened, and the secret kept. Snake-eyed Stojan, with his nerves of steel, distributed the holy bread unflinching.

Services were sung; the church black-draped which yesterday shone gold in dome and screen; the façade of the palace hung in mourning, as the city was from end to end; the flags half-masted. The court attended the solemn function at the Greek Cathedral, but without the King, who was still confined to his apartments. The proposed review of troops did not take place in Waldemar's absence.

The plotters held their breath upon the brink of action. Stroimir, Guamar, and the Russian agent had entered the city unobserved, and they were

ready. Varescu was ready; Levisohn was ready to harangue the people; Risoff was ready to take command of the town; Andrassy, that of the army; Nelaguine, the Ambassador to Turkey, was ready to put the needful face upon things there; Vassilio was ready to assassinate the King, and Stojan to assassinate the Premier. The refugees were ready to rush into the country from several points at once; the Haiduks were ready to join them on their entry. The men of the proposed new Ministry were, as the Head of the Asiatic Department at Petersburg had wisely stipulated, "persons who had previously declared that they were ready to fulfil the requirements of the Imperial Government." General Bagrianoff awaited, a mile or two from Zarilov, the signal to appear and proclaim the Provisional Government in the name of His Imperial Majesty the Czar.

Ilona feigned indisposition, and kept Mara constantly beside her, as agreed on with Andrassy: towards twilight she rose. In the west, clouds like a mask, and the sun sinking, peering through their gaps like eyes of fire. The tension was growing too intolerably strong, the time too intolerably short. When would he do it? When would it be over? When would the blow be struck beyond recall? . . . Ilona was still in ignorance of the plot. Andrassy, in spite of his infatuation for her, had constrained himself to keep the secret. . . . Evening crept on; Mara retired; the Countess was alone. A tap on the door: Vassilio entered hastily; he paled and flushed by turns.

"Ilona, before I go to him, I come to tell you I am ready. Say it is for you I do it, and my hand will be as firm as fate! Tell me you are glad, and will reward me! Kiss me once—and I will go!"

She threw herself into his arms, and begged heaven for him with her kisses.

"Go," she whispered. "Quick! . . . I cannot wait . . . It must be now, or I shall die of the suspense—for ah, I loved him!"

Vassilio, reeling with the words, glance, kiss, her breath upon his throat, the languid perfume of her hair, sprang to the door, drew a dagger which he showed and sheathed again, and then was gone.

She sank into a chair, half-swooning.

Judas! Judas! Judas! Let him do the deed, and then—she would accuse him to the guards! Let him betray his master first, and lose his soul, and then—she would reward him! . . . The double treason pleased her—first to strike and kill, then break the bloody dagger. All her barbaric soul was roused to meet the issue—if the time were not so long. . . . She sat and lashed herself to rage against the King, the man who had repaid her love with pity: she did not divine that she was trying to match fire against ice with the chill of dread that froze her. She savagely rejoiced in her own planned perfidy towards Vassilio, unguessing that a deadly fear for Waldemar himself was spurring her against the traitor. . . . How long, dear God, how long? . . . She rose—began to pace the room, her hands upon her beating heart. Air, air! She felt that she must stifle. Was he even now striking the blow? . . . How many minutes? Ten—fifteen. Each minute seemed an age revolving. Time, accursed time, from which she used to hope so much, and which had brought her but this hour! . . . Useless to pace the floor. If she could hear—could know how it was going! She stood still, fixed and mute as marble, clenched hands cold upon her colder breast. . . . Hark! what was that? A cry, or her own guilty conscience begging mercy? If she dared but glide along the corridor and listen in the royal anteroom. . . . Her glance, in its uncertain round, lit on the Ikon. Words in

Mara's pleading voice rushed beating on her ears. "Save him! He is so kind and patient, so gentle, so strong, so noble, so forgiving!" Ilona clenched her hands upon her ears, as if the bodiless voice could be shut out. . . . Yes, she must go: she must be ready to peal shriek on shriek, and trap the traitor. . . . "He taught me to love, and to forget revenge; only to love—and yet they hate him!" It was no longer the untaught peasant's voice, but that of conscience, that of God. Ilona rushed from the room: she knew they were alone—it might be done before she reached him! "Save him! Watch over him! Keep him! In the name of the True God!" Quick! a breath's time more might be too late! Quick! not that monstrous crime upon her soul! Quick! . . . In another instant Ilona had reached the ante-chamber.

It was nearly midnight, and the promise of the sultry noon was being fulfilled in tardy storm. Waldemar, prostrated through the day by one of those torturing headaches, partly nervous, partly constitutional, to which his latent malady subjected him, had risen after dark and wandered idly for an hour in the moonlit gardens of the palace: these had been the favourite haunt of Fredegonde, and nightingales sang there from dusk till dawn. Amidst his memories, those waking dreams which were the solace of his life, his pain's sweet sole nepenthe, Waldemar remembered a petition for grace which had lain now two days unexamined.

"Work, not dreams nor tears, must bring me near her. Truly the old Latin said, 'To labour is to pray.' To labour for praise, for fame, or for the right, is well, but better for the love which wings the soul and makes death seem twin lives' eternal union!"

When Vassilio entered, the King was at the massive

paper-littered table where he worked. His head, where the pain still raged, but dully, on his hand, he was examining the grounds of the petition.

"Your Majesty is better?" said Vassilio, trying to control his voice. Waldemar turned, with a smile of welcome.

"Is it thou?" he said. A sudden peal of thunder cracked above, which drowned the growl of Karaman. The boar-hound's hair was bristling on his stalwart neck and back; his red deep eye-pits glistened. "Await me, Vassilio," said the King. "I shall have done at once. This must be answered by the morning, for the poor wretch is awaiting life or death."

Andrassy did not answer: he was thinking where he best could plant his knife. He cursed below his breath; but for the noise of the report he could have used a pistol. Waldemar was half-dressed, in the stifling heat the storm had not yet freshened; nothing to baulk the dagger but his light lawn shirt with fine lace ruffles. . . . "And so he has determined to replace me—*when it can be done discreetly?*" thought the traitor. "And yet he smiles me welcome—calls me 'thou'—!" He fingered the knife where it lay hidden. . . . The glare of hate his heavy-lidded eyes had shown, died out; a cynic scrutiny replaced it. Where should he strike? There must be neither cry nor blood: the knife must drive its way straight to the heart, and then stay fixed there. He had promised Ilona a hand as firm as fate . . . he reeled, remembering her caresses. A second later, hand had shut on hilt, for he heard her breathe again, "But ah, I loved him!"

Waldemar stirred. Was he subtly conscious of the hate whose mighty torrent rolled towards him? Did he feel an instant's premonition, menaced life's instinctive thrill of dread? Vassilio, at the moment, watched him lynx-like from behind. The thunder,

as the storm burst, pealed and echoed. Was there no reluctance of the blood which must be shed, no shudder of the flesh before the knife-edge? . . . The King took his pen up, and half turned towards Andrassy, with a grave and earnest look of question.

"I am going to grant the grace," he said. "The prisoner is young, and his crime was the direct result of wrongs which had been done him. Crime is another form of war, which is the whole creation's curse—the war of individual on society; while war is the crime of society against itself and civilisation. Until we stamp out war, all varieties of violence can show it as their legal precedent. Crime and war are forms of—madness," said the King—his voice dropped as he spoke the fatal word. "Plagues of the abstract human soul which taint its concrete manifestations. . . . What can I do, Vassilio? There are sores which need the knife, and sores which need the balm: this one I think the balm will cure. On my head be the evil if it does not! Life is too obscure, too baffling, for Justice to reside in the unguided hands of man; and thus I choose the sister-virtue, Mercy." He paused. "What sayest thou, Vassilio?"

Clear gaze, without a doubt of wrong! clear gaze, which only sought to clearly see the right! Andrassy's eyes fell as he met it, but the woman's face came smiling between him and shame. He was standing back, in shadow, grasping fast the strong knife's hilt: the King, half wondering at his silence, asked again, "What dost thou think, then?"

"Sign it," said Andrassy.

Waldemar again took up the pen. Vassilio leaned upon his chair's carved back, and looked across his shoulder. The King began to sign his name to the petition, when the ink in his pen ran dry. As he stopped to dip it freshly, his eyes lit on a mirror's broad sheet opposite. . . . He saw himself in the full light,

his friend's face like a demon's just above him, and a hand which held a knife flash down to strike—and felt the stab's sharp agony.

Other eyes had seen the dastard hand descend, the King sink forward sideways on the table where the plea for grace was signed in blood which stifled mouth and nostrils. Ilona rushed to him, pealing shriek on shriek: the boarhound bounded at the traitor. At last the brute's instinctive and unerring hate broke free in overmastering fury. The huge demonic head, with gaping jaws and flaming eye-pits, was upon him; now, unarmed, he faced a rage more hideous than the utmost wrath of reasoning man. Fangs in his throat—and the weight behind them flung him over, bore him to the ground. Useless to struggle, for his knife, as he had planned, was fixed where he had plunged it; useless to wrestle, for the brute had got him down and was upon him like a wolf or boar; useless to shout, or try to, for his throat was lacerated, ravaged; useless to hope, for Ilona had spurned him with her foot as she had passed to fling herself upon the King.

Theodosi, heading half a dozen guards, rushed in.

"He murdered him!" wailed Ilona. "Here, to the King! Let the other die! Let him die! He is the murderer!"

Theodosi drew the dagger out with shaking hands.

"He is not dead. The blood flows."

"Ah, but he will die!" she moaned. "I feel he must!" Then, "Quick for what remedies you can—I'll hold him up and try to staunch the wound—" Theodosi left her.

The guards had thrown themselves upon the hound and man, who hideously suggested some lost soul seized by a demon. Vassilio still struggled, faintly, blindly, with the instinct of one, tortured, who has not lost consciousness: the dog growled out defiance

and held fast, his mighty muzzle at the murderer's throat. . . . At last the men tore them apart, and bore Vassilio dying from the room. His volatile petulant haughty headstrong perjured soul was on the wing. As he passed the King and Ilona, he vainly tried to speak, denounce her, curse her, with his cheated life's last struggle.

The King had swooned, and lay like marble on her breast, pale, breathing, yet he seemed already dead. She clasped him fast, her strong hands firm and tender on the wound—the cursed wound, dug sevenfold deep in her own heart! . . . The guards had dragged the giant hound away: they were alone. She branded his cold brows and lips with kisses. Kisses of hate, of hell, yet fired with a passion now supreme. Beyond the pang of guilt, the dread of death, soared exultation.

“It has brought him once more here into my arms!”

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LEGACY OF PEACE

"In all things sought to see the whole ;
Brooked no disguise ;
And set his heart upon the goal,
Not on the prize."

WILLIAM WATSON.

"THERE is not a man in the present Cabinet who could resist a *coup d'état*, except the Premier, and he will be gone to his account," Levisohn had said, on the night of the ballot. When Stojan gained entrance to the Premier's house, towards midnight, on the pretext of calling him to the bedside of the King, who, he said, was seized with mortal illness and receiving the last rites, Fokshany grew suspicious. In selecting a priest for the office, the plotters had overlooked the Premier's extreme distrust of churchmen, whom he regarded as a body whose greed kept them ever intermeddling with the State. Fokshany told his servant to assure the Arch-priest he would join him as soon as he could hurry on some clothes (he had, in fact, not yet retired), but meanwhile send quick to the Konak to verify the news. No sooner had the man descended than Stojan presented himself in haste before the Premier, urging him to leave the house at once, and dilating on the dangerous condition of the King. Fokshany, only anxious to gain time, encouraged him to grow diffuse in detail, but noted that the Arch-priest, who had so

arranged that they were standing face to face, kept his right hand at his girdle. The two men stood there eye to eye, Fokshany every instant more suspicious: his own hand, in his pocket, grasped a pistol, which lay always loaded by his bed. The Arch-priest's eyes grew keener, brighter, like a snake's which lifts its head to spring; Fokshany's, undecipherable, secret, watched the other's: Stojan was about to draw and strike.

"What have you there in your belt?" asked Fokshany suddenly, with perfect calm. He took two steps back, raised his pistol, and fired as the Arch-priest launched himself upon him. . . . Stojan lay groaning, his shoulder shattered; the Premier left him on the floor. Half an hour later, the troops Fokshany had summoned, as was thought, for the review, had closed, at a signal, round his house and round the Konak, surprised the rebel regiments and seized the citadel, and taken full possession of the town. The news of the attempt upon the King got out, and consternation followed. The population rushed into the streets, and the white and pastoral city, still more pale under the waning moon, became a cauldron of excitement. Varescu was arrested promptly, and a little later Stroimir himself was captured. Guamar vanished, but at dawn it was found that a horseman had galloped out of the city, heading for the south, had changed his dying beast for another where the mountain country began, and there had been lost sight of. General Bagrianoff was timely warned, and crossed the frontier. Levisohn had known of whom he spoke when he said that Fokshany was able to resist a *coup d'état*: the Premier, in one night, had crushed the plot.

Eminent physicians were summoned from Vienna to consult on the condition of the King. For a week he lay delirious between life and death, and then the

doctors' efforts, the cares of Theodosi, the nursing which Ilona claimed right to lavish on him by virtue of her aid at Königslust, began to take effect. Youth; a certain strength of constitution and of body which seconded instead of lessening the force of his inherited malady; the fatal law which brings most often death to the reluctant, and puts those anxious for release aside; the chance which made the knife swerve on a rib and touch the lung instead of driving through the heart, had saved him. If no further hæmorrhage occurred, the King would live. But his awakening!

To struggle through delirium's fever-mists, the clouds of madness brought about him by the shock, the depths of physical feebleness, to this—the death of his last hopes, his last ideals! The losses of Gadatz and Fredegonde he met as a captive does the galling of accustomed chains; but behind these something hideous, undefined, arose, the spectre of the rack. . . . He learned about the plot from Ilona, who longed to shift the act's responsibility from her own soul, and to her conscience, with sophistries a woman never lacks, had already half succeeded. He was too weak to marvel at her presence, in the light of her past passionate confession: all had been righted when she knelt beside his bed and kissed his hand, saying, "I could not stay away. You will forgive me?" But he—Vassilio: the friend! the murderer! . . . When Waldemar recalled that demon-mask seen clear above him as the knife flashed down, he turned his face away.

"Why should I live?" he said. "I meant to help, to heal, to better—but I thought them men, not devils."

Ilona burst into passionate tears, and hid her shamed face in her hands.

When Waldemar heard of the great Haiduk's

capture, he summoned Fokshany to his bed. . . . Half an hour later, the Premier, his ivory pallor heightened by the blanch of rage, left the chamber of his royal master.

"A madman!" he was thinking. "A crowned maniac! He will yet find means to wreck the State. 'Justice—Right!' What are they? Kings' and statesmen's right is policy alone!"

An hour later Waldemar and Stroimir were face to face. A solemn contrast marked them, manifold, and pregnant with suggestion. The giant Haiduk, with his smouldering eyes and coal-black beard, confronted his pale victor, who was pillow-lifted on a couch, and whose faint life seemed still in the hollow of Death's hand. His fearless sullen savage gaze, bent brows above it, met the King's sublime regard, the lofty earnest spiritual look of one whose soul sees far beyond earth's transient wrath and tumult.

"Stroimir," began Waldemar. His silver voice, vibrating with emotion, bore without words a message of peace to the Haiduk's stormy soul. "Stroimir, my father's crime against your father is avenged through you on me, and I am dying."

The Haiduk's eyes flamed: he was thinking of his son. Though himself should perish, Miloutim was safe, might live, might reign! And so the Usurper felt his hour was coming? Stroimir exulted silently.

"Death is man's ultimate atonement, which I am soon to make. More than his life no man can offer; therefore take the sacrifice, and let us be at peace."

Stroimir fixed his keen eyes, the observant eyes of woodsman, shepherd, hunter, on the King. He did not speak, but hate became quiescent, giving place to wonder. What was this?

"Remember, Stroimir, that the crime was not my crime, but done when I was in my boyhood. Remember that the amnesty which brought you back from exile was my first act on the throne."

The Haiduk's stern gaze fell before the King's, with its union of majesty and mildness. Stroimir kept silence, but recalled his wish that battle, not the assassin, had been arbiter between them.

"You have hated me," said Waldemar, "but I have never hated you. And yet, if you were the victim of a political crime, my own life has been sacrificed to it from the beginning. To you, the throne is the first aim; to me, the heaviest chain with which a free man can be shackled. Had it been mine to do, I should have abdicated in your favour; but my duty called me to be steward of the people's welfare, and I could not leave my trust."

The Haiduk had again fixed smouldering eyes beneath bent brows upon him: what did this mean? Could he be mocking him, with that pure smile, like dawn's first breaking, on his face?

"Stroimir," said Waldemar, taking difficult breath, and still more pallid, "you and I were born to hatred, rivalry, revenge, yet not through fault of ours. You are the son of the man who freed Alberia: I am of alien race. You by right should occupy the throne, yet bloody fate has seated me upon it. Till now our stars have crossed disastrously; but yours is strongest—mine goes down. Now at last let peace be born between us, hatred buried. Can you say Amen?"

Stroimir, as the King spoke of their stars and fate, recalled the blazing portent of the valley. Half its thrice-accursed omen was fulfilled in his captivity: his death would seal the rest.

"Why should I swear peace with one who holds me prisoner and seeks my life?" exclaimed the

Haiduk. "Why should I swear peace with one whose father killed my father, and whose race has robbed my race?"

"True," said the King, his clear look meeting and disarming Stroimir's ominous regard. "True, but the time has come for reparation and atonement."

Again the contrast deepened between the great barbarian, and the century's and civilisation's son. Not in outward mould of huge and slender; not in face, the rugged bearded visage of the mighty mountaineer confronted with the clear-cut features of a countenance grown pale as marble and as pure; not in strength, the one erect, great-boned, and iron-thewed, the other prostrate, weak, and wounded; but in the soul, the invisible incomputable total of the man. The Haiduk's sombre gaze had grown intense, suspicious, eager; Waldemar's was noble, open, calm.

"Lying here at the gates of death," said the King, "I have thought of many things, and deeply. Once I believed myself called to lead Alberia forward, onward, upward—but I myself have fallen by the way. I thought I could reform, improve, advance, elevate, culture, civilise. I thought that by a lifetime's unremitting work, I might shape popular sentiment to high ideals of government and education, higher standards of humanity. Far in the future I dreamed I saw a day when monarchy should be abolished; when merit, not privilege, should rule the land; when, instead of establishing another dynasty upon my death, a republic should arise—the government of the future; the noblest system, best: for the world wants not kings whom it must bow before, but pioneers, poets, prophets, the inspired band, led by whom it may learn to lift its forehead ever more upward to the sun. I dreamed of a day when no

free man should bend the knee to superficial grandeur ; when highest conduct should be truest crown ; when work should guarantee man bread ; when the State should become guardian, not tyrant, of the people ; when humanity, not interest, should sway nations' governments ; when egotism should pass as a reproach. . . . Dreams, dreams ! Precious as the fair ideal which I have served with all my being—yet but dreams. . . . One man cannot change a people. Life's law is development, not revolution. Stroimir, the task is taken from my hands, and if I would, I could not finish it. Nations have a lifetime even as men have, and their seasons, like the year. Although I cease to guide Alberia, its people will emerge from winter into spring. Although my plans and dreams lie dead beside me, the nation will reach summer's flowers and autumn's fruit. I should have tried to help the issue, but the master-impulse is my century's, not mine. Greater powers are abroad than one man's soul, no matter how aspiring. Greater factors than the individual exist to teach and guide the nations. Let us have faith in the future, faith in the god-like spark in man ; faith in a day when the Ideal not the Material shall be the gospel of the world !”

The dream of great souls is of their fellows' greatness : it had carried the King beyond himself. Abruptly a mortal faintness overtook him : he pointed to a cordial in a flask at hand, and swooned. Stroimir looked at him a moment, curiously, and then poured out a measure of the rich restorative. The pity of the generous and strong for weakness seized him : kneeling down, the Haiduk raised the King with one huge arm, and gently put the cordial to his lips. . . . Waldemar roused in his enemy's arms.

“ I feared thou wert dying !” exclaimed Stroimir.

"*Feared!*" replied the King, a sad smile on his lips.

"Ay," said the Haiduk, standing at his giant height again. "For you are other than I thought you."

A divine smile illumined the face of the King.

"Circumstance, not temper, made us enemies," said Waldemar, "and parted us by double crime; but now forgiveness may unite us. Stroimir, can we both forgive?"

The Haiduk took the chill white hand extended, and kept it long between his vital palms. Memory, remorse, even shame, loured dark upon his face. He bowed his head.

"Stroimir," said the King, his voice grown eloquent of deep and still content, "you spoke of swearing peace with one who holds you prisoner and seeks your life. Listen: I desire and take no vengeance. From this hour you are free."

"Free!" The Haiduk raised his head as a lion does which shakes his mane and roars exultant.

"Free," said Waldemar. "And I shall proclaim you my successor, subject to the people's will."

There was long silence. A tear rolled slow down Stroimir's cheek: the first tear of his life.

"Why," he muttered, "did they never tell me thou wert nobler than myself? I thought of vengeance only; thou, of pardon; thou, of peace! If I had known thee as thou art, I would have called thee brother and not enemy!"

"Call me brother now," said Waldemar, "for I am passing to where all are brothers. . . . Take the throne your father founded, and forget the wrongs and sorrows of the past! Reign over the nation you were born of, as I, an alien, might not reign! Remember, Stroimir, when my short hour on the throne has been forgotten in the rushing tide of time, that I, in this more solemn hour between us, left a

legacy of brotherhood and peace through you to man."

. . . Dusk fell. Ilona, afraid, came to the door: there was utter silence in the room. The King had swooned again, and Stroimir knelt beside him with his lips upon the passive hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE PRECIPICE OF THE LOM

" Ah, but the night, the night is thine,
Thou art avenged in the sinking night
Sick unto death of an alien love
My soul is with thee from light to light.
Now no weeping
Gains from death one little hour's delay
But mouth to mouth, and heart to heart,
No more on earth, O God, no more !
ANNE REEVE ALDRICH.

THE son of Alberia's hero was to mount Alberia's throne, when the dying Usurper should be dead. The valley lay in all the glory of the fruitful year, about to welcome Stroimir. The vines were in cluster, the corn growing gold ; the fruit trees bore a blushing burden. Nature revelled in her prime of beauty, richening the lavish year.

What was the shadow on the faces of all those who flocked to welcome the great Haiduk home? Not the shade of the little white clouds which came floating up from behind the green hill-tops to make the azure sky more blue. Not the fear of the Balestar still blazing weird and fierce in the northern sky above Sokol and Zarilov. Not the dread of civil war, when the country was quieted at last and all was peace. And yet the shadow was dark on the faces of those who welcomed Stroimir. All the village was in feast-dress, yet a cloud was on the

brows of all. Jovan had ridden from Kloster Sokol to embrace his great bond-brother, the Haiduk—Stroimir, on the throne, would later make him Metropolitan—but now his hand was at the gold cross on his breast, and his undaunted brow was stern. Sima had grown pasty-faced with trouble, in spite of all the bacon the Popadia cooked for him with nicest care; he frequently burst out puffing, as his way was when perplexed, and never ceased to pat his stomach. The fat Popadia herself was careworn, though she tried to hide it and to give him courage. Loubitza showed a face all swelled with weeping, and her eyes flashed savage fire. Lazar wore his old short pelt, blue trousers, and black cap, disdaining, as always, holiday attire; but his face looked gaunter and more wolfish, while his keen inexorable smile was gone.

Stroimir rode alone into the valley on his great black charger, which the youths believed was Marko's mighty Sharaz, as they whispered he was Marko's self returned. The young men pressed round him, all dressed in their feast-garments, eager to kiss his hand or foot and take his bridle. Girls scattered flowers, and danced, light as vili, hair floating, cheeks flushing, along his path. A chorus, youths' voices and maidens', uplifted—but where were Guamar's glorious notes? And amongst the light dancing-girls, where was Bosilika—fairy feet and witching smile and tawny hair? Where, by the well, in the ranks of the elders awaiting the chief, was his son Miloutim? Stroimir dismounted, embracing his bond-brothers: then he looked about him, paling.

“Where is Miloutim?”

Dead silence answered, grimmer than murmurs. Heads were shaken, troubled brows were bent.

“Where is my son?” cried the Haiduk, looking from face to face with eyes of fire. The old men muttered together. “What!—has he fallen in

battle?" said Stroimir hoarsely, as a barbed thought struck him unawares. Lazar stepped forward.

"Not fallen in battle, but fled from the battle," he answered. Stroimir turned upon him like a lion.

"Thou liest! No son of mine—"

"Not fled from battle only," pursued Lazar, inexorably proceeding, "battle where the rest of us were wolves in fierceness, snakes in craft, and left a foe of twice our numbers cut to pieces; not coward only, but a ravisher of women. . . . Dost thou see my grandchild Bosa, Stroimir?"

The Haiduk glared about him, and then seized the bony arm of Lazar in a granite grasp.

"Where are they?" he thundered.

"Dost thou think he would not have to front thy wrath's face now, if we but knew?" snarled the old wolf fiercely. "One from the village Alexinaz came to tell us he had met them in the forest; she swooned, as it seemed, and he carrying her—he had heard cries awhile before. I tell thee it was the day when only women and dotards were left in the valley: he fled from the battle, and bore her off from the midst of her companions at the well."

They were standing on the spot. Lazar pointed to a knot of girls, who shrank apart and hung their heads. "The youths have been searching the forests, and so have thy haiduks," pursued Lazar. "I, myself, slung on my carbine and went to seek that spawn of hell and take his life. Only last night I came back, and found that Guamar, who escaped from Zarilov, had tardy made his way here, . . . and hearing this, had waited for no rest or food, but rushed as if distraught into the mountains. . . . Stroimir, for acts like this, we drove the accursed Turk beyond our frontiers!"

Stroimir made no answer: the hour which should have seen his triumph was the blackest of his life.

He stood, head bowed, the red-hot iron of shame on his heroic brow; an overwhelming sense of wrath and horror in his heart, the blindness of calamity.

"My son . . . my son! . . ." he muttered. The pedestal of all his hopes had crumbled into dust.

"Ay, thy son!" screeched Loubitza, startling the deep silence which the rest preserved. "Thy son! . . . If he were son to any other, Stroimir, the maid's shame would be paid for with his life!"

Suddenly the Haiduk raised his head.

"No son of mine—no longer son of mine! This was the Bale-star's message. Cursed be the day when I was born! . . . Coward and ravisher, I have the throne at last, but now no son, no son! . . . To the forest! Find him. Bring him before me. God spoke through the woman. He shall die."

Sunset was blazing red upon Sokol, high on the throne of the topmost crag. Night lurked below in the chasms and gaps, and masked the roaring Lom.

"Ranko! Ranko!" Strong men's voices, loud and urgent, at the ruined gates. The dwarf appeared, as if by magic, on the boundaries of his garden, but they sought a flower more precious still than his.

"Hast thou seen a youth and girl?" asked Stroimir. "Tell no lies, or thy long tale of years is counted!"

Lazar pressed forward.

"A bright-haired lass thou gavest a carnation to, this spring gone by. She coveted thy Rose of Beauty, so she flung it in thy face for thanks, and fled."

"Speak!" panted Sima.

"Speak, in the name of the True God!" adjured the Archimandrite.

Ranko scrutinised them with his sunk and piercing eyes, then smiled—a smile that Jovan shuddered at.

"In the name of the True God," replied the hunch-

back, "by whose grace I bear this hump, I tell ye there is one has been before you."

"What!—they are here?—"

"Yes, here upon the crag, not—back, upon your lives!—here in my garden. Back!" yelled the dwarf, and drew a knife whose blade flashed keen and deadly as his glances. He crouched and yet dilated, while he seemed to bloat with rage, like some demonic toad that swelled with venom. "Back! Man's clumsy cursed foot has never trampled here since I made it a new Eden with the flowers. I hate ye, with your straight backs and strong bodies—curse ye all! I wish that I could water these red roses with red blood of yours, and feast the raven on your vitals!"

The youths who had been helping Lazar search turned pale, and fingered tokens hung about their necks, or muttered charms.

"Go your ways, 'go!" sneered the dwarf. "Ye shall find her near the precipice above the Lom. There is another has found her already—curst jade that flung my flower back upon me!"

They left him there at the gates, blaspheming grimly till he saw them well away. Then he sheathed his knife, cast a long look at the glowing garden, and, the raven on his peaky shoulder, followed.

The sun's last beams hung flags of flame on Sokol's highest towers. Night cloaked the flanks of the mountain, and the precipice of the Lom. . . . Where should they find her? Was Miloutim with her? Had the hunchback told the truth? . . . The men descended like a funeral train, and Stroimir's locked lips grew white. The way wound round the castle's base, and out upon a space to which the mighty ruin's walls struck down like roots; a space shut by the rock's sheer rugged cliff, and brinking on the chasm of the unbottomed river. . . . The men were climbing

downward, one by one, when Stroimir stopped abruptly. Below him, Bosilika was crouched upon the ground, her bright hair wild, her garments, now no longer white, in tatters, watching with unmoved and glassy eyes some scene still hidden from the Haiduk. . . . Stroimir set his jaws, took a few more leaden steps down the steep and treacherous path—then stopped again.

Miloutim!—bloated with fury and the raki, now exhausted, which had set his brain on fire, charging at Guamar, whose back was to the precipice, and who, though fiercely meeting him, gave ground. Battling, striking, cursing, reeling, wrestling, they clung in an embrace of death, every instant nearer to the brink, and blinder in their frenzy to the peril. Bosilika sat like the dead, and watched them struggling, with her vacant eyes; her hand, by instinct, held her love-lock. Far below them the hungry Lom thundered dragon-like from its caverns.

Stroimir, shaking off his deadly dread, sprang down the rocks with shouted warnings. He could see their faces, close together: Miloutim's, grown purple, with his fury's foam upon his lips; and Guamar, white with hunger and fatigue, whose eyes were living fire.

"Miloutim! Miloutim!" the Haiduk groaned: it was destiny—he could not reach them. "Miloutim!" the echoes answered, like the laughing demons of the Lom.

Battling, striking, cursing, reeling, wrestling, they clung in an embrace of death; and now the edge was gaping for their feet, the void and night were waiting.

"Miloutim!" thundered the Haiduk, forgetting all but the father's instinct for his son. . . . If his voice had been the great archangel's, its clarion would have found their ears as deaf.

Bosilika watched with her vacant stare, the love-

lock in her fingers. She never stirred as they strained and strove on the edge, for she was dying like a trampled flower. Stroimir and the rest were pouring down the path's last treacherous curve, when the battling figures on the brink, clutched breast to breast, pitched back, reeled over, and were gone.

A shout, a groan, dead silence; then an appalling laugh. The dwarf stood high on the ruins, the sunset's last red beam upon his ghastly face, pointing towards the precipice with a hand as lean as Death's.

"Dead!" he shrilled in exultation. "Dead—she too! All dead but I!"

"Dead! All dead but I!" shrieked back the ancient echoes of the mountains.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE GREAT UNKNOWN IDEAL

"O molto amato cuore, ogni mio ufficio verso te è fornito ; nè più altro mi resta a fare si non di venire con la mia anima a fare alla tua compagnia."—GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO.

SINCE the night when Waldemar's life was attempted, Mara had a hundred times begged Ilona at least to let her come and kiss his hand. Ilona had put her off, warning her especially to say no word about Leonti to the King: she was morbidly afraid that her own deception might in some way lead to her unmasking. But the day after his meeting with the Haiduk, Waldemar himself desired Mara's presence. He had passed the morning making a will in which his private fortune was disposed of: a testament of patriot and philanthropist, whose country and his people are nearest to his heart in life and death.

Waldemar's couch was at a window which commanded the glorious meeting of the Danube and the Save, and the horizon-girdled plains of Hungary. Ilona sat near him, pale with anxiety and the intolerable regret of one who has destroyed a thing supremely coveted, of which, too late, he fancies he might still have gained possession—a regret too base to name beside remorse, but which has all remorse's powers of anguish. Beside the King lay Karaman, strong as his heroic namesake, Ban Strahinya's greyhound, in his service to his lord; the woman and the

dog confronted, the faithful and unfaithful, by the couch.

Half an hour later, in spite of Ilona's protests that the King's strength could not stand the further strain, Mara was kneeling at his side. The girl was too profoundly moved to speak, but passionately kissed the hand whose one-time strength had saved her.

"Dear lord, you are better?" she murmured at last.

"Yes, little sister, better . . . nearly well," said Waldemar, with a smile which seemed to Mara's loving eyes almost angelic.

"I have so often begged to see you," cried the girl, "and tried to come and nurse you, but the Countess always told me you were still too ill, that I must wait another day. I wanted to be near you, dearest lord, my saviour, to protect you if those wolves, those devils, came again—every night I have stolen from my bed, and lain down there to watch outside your door. . . . But what is the floor to my strong limbs, dear master?—to me, whom thy goodness has raised from the ground? Once I lay down with the mastiffs, out in the open, under the shining stars, because the dogs loved me, and those I lived with loathed me and cursed my name. Am I not honoured to lie at thy feet, then, to guard thy door, to waken and watch while thou sleepest, thou whom I love as I did the dear St. Jovan of the valley?"

"Little sister, thine innocent love heals the treacherous wounds of hate. I should long to live, were the world all gratitude and kindness, like thy spirit."

"But thou wilt live—thou wilt live, dear lord?" murmured Mara, pale and breathless. "Why wouldst thou die and leave those who love thee?"

"No, my child; let us speak of living, not of dying," softly said the King. "Let us speak of thy-

self and thy future, not of my life's outworn strand. . . . Do you remember how I asked you to sacrifice past hatred for the sake of the future's unborn loves, that day beside the lake Lasnitza? Do you remember, little sister, how I spoke to you of home and husband, twice-dear children in your arms, the purity and glory life would offer, as the rose, unfolding, offers blush and perfume?" Waldemar paused; a sigh, forbidden, yet too strong, escaped him, though suppressed. Mara, flushing to the brows, grew radiant.

"Dear lord, then you have heard? You guessed it? Oh, I am so happy! We have loved each other for so long, and now if you approve him—"

"Whom hast thou chosen, little sister?" asked the King, concealing his surprise.

"Maxim, old Lazar's grandson, of the valley. . . . When the rest gave me blows and curses, he always came to comfort me; when Loubitza starved me to punish me, he used to bring me his portion—what was the food to him, he would laugh, who was so strong and hardy?—and when they tore my Rose of Beauty, which the dwarf had given me above the rest, to pieces in my face, he remembered, and brought me another, from Sokol and Ranko, to Zarilov! . . . I used to speak roughly, repulsing his goodness, because my life was too bitter for love; but since I have known thee, dear master, my heart has grown soft, for I see that all men are not cruel when thou canst be so kind."

"Who could be other than kind to thee, my child?" said Waldemar, with sudden sadness: he thought of the eternal law by which the evil persecute the good. "And your wedding, little sister? Tell me, when is it to be?"

She hid her happy face upon the neck of Karaman, who sat up in grim majesty beside her.

"When you permit, dear master."

"Then it shall be soon—yes, very soon," he thought, "or I shall sadden and not gladden it. The reason why I spoke to you just now about our talk beside the lake was that I had been thinking of your future—not of this happiness so near and real, but of the happiness I hoped might come hereafter. I thought you had still to watch that marvellous dawn arise and break in day's full splendour. I thought, my child, you had not yet received the infinite privilege of love. . . . Love, for those who love indeed, is either gate of heaven or mouth of hell. But all your life has been unhappy until now; henceforward every hour should be bright. . . . At least what I can do is done; I have arranged to dower you as you deserve. You will accept the gift, remembering how I promised to protect you as a brother, little sister? If I had the richer gift of happiness, that also should be yours."

Mara pressed her lips upon his hand.

"Dear hand, so generous and so gentle!" A faintest cloud of sadness stole across her joy, and dropped its transient rain of tears. "Dear lord, if happiness were mine to give to you . . ." she murmured: something told her, in her own life's laughing prime, of his life's measure, barrenness, and strong endurance.

"Happiness!" answered the King, as if he spoke with reverence a sacred name. A smile, half wistfulness, half hope, broke on his face, like some celestial dawn. "Happiness . . . hush, little sister! Perhaps I may be nearer to it than I know."

A wave of strange emotion shook Mara to the depths of heart and soul; she clung fast, weeping, to his hand.

Later, when Ilona returned, light-footed, he was sleeping and alone. Seating herself in her accus-

tomed chair, she fixed her eyes upon his quiet face. Inexplicable eyes, with all their secrets, love and hate, despair and vengeance! They gazed, unblinded by the tender veil of tears, upon her work. . . . So still, so pale, so calm! . . . She wrung her hands—the savage sudden gesture of a pain too piercing.

“He will look like that when he is dead!”

. . . Abruptly she started to her feet. Without a word or sign, Fokshany stood beside her.

“Countess, my mission will excuse me,” said the Premier: his voice at once awakened the King. The start of weakened body, shattered nerves, the haggard face and glance, showed Waldemar’s exhaustion. “Your Majesty will pardon me,” pursued Fokshany. “Solicitude for the royal safety prompts this haste.”

“What!” said the King, his weariness of life and all its turmoils in his eyes. “Another plot—new perfidy? I did not think that Stroimir would seek to shorten days so few as mine. . . .”

“Your Majesty,” replied Fokshany, “the traitor is not Stroimir, but a woman.” With perfect calm he turned and fixed his eyes on Ilona.

The King could not mistake the action: starting up, he strained his half-healed wound. She received the look undaunted, never stirring, but her steadfast face grew slowly white. Fokshany, irritated at her demon strength, which promised him a stubborn battle, turned to his master, pointing a long, slender, waxen finger in her face, and said:

“*This* woman is the traitor.”

Ilona rose to her feet.

“I think,” she answered icily, “that Count Fokshany has gone mad. Your Majesty yourself can testify to the devotion of my care for you?”

“Yes,” said the King, like an automaton, “I can bear witness to her great devotion.” He was thinking of Vassilio, and saw again that demon-mask above

him in the mirror. Was life all treachery? Were men all traitors? . . . O sleep, death, ultimate oblivion! when, when?

"Madam, some faint sense of late remorse, perhaps, has prompted you to nurse the King. That does not clear you of the guilt of having instigated his assassination."

"Count Fokshany, this is childish. Do not try to fasten an entire Panslavist plot upon the shoulders of one guiltless woman!"

"I shall not try to fasten anything which will not fit there on your shoulders, Countess." They stood confronted, she superb in scorn, he vigilant, secure, and almost smiling. His masked eyes met her invincible gaze with a glitter of pitiless hate.

"You can fasten nothing on me, then!" she exclaimed boldly. "The King himself knows all my heart."

"Then you acknowledge that you love him?" sneered Fokshany.

"I do, with pride!" cried Ilona, one breathless second past. "Is he not loveable? Is he not noble above all men, that to love him should be shame? . . . And loving him, how could I hurt him?"

The Premier drew a paper from his breast.

"You have heard this woman's confession: now your Majesty shall hear the confession of Andrassy. As his guardian, I took charge of his papers on his death, and came on this to-day." Fokshany turned on Ilona a glance which flashed the bitterness he felt about his son's death and dishonour, the knowledge of his son's irreparable ruin, at her hands, and promised equal vengeance. It was perhaps the only gleam of passion which his ivory mask ever betrayed. He began reading.

"THE KONAK, ZARILOV.

"This is to prevent a treachery, which I fear, being

accomplished with impunity. I write this in the shadow of the crime I contemplate: and as this message can be only opened on my death, or what would be the same, the failure of the present plot, I swear as one on the brink of eternity that what I write is true.'” Fokshany paused a moment, remembering that he who wrote had reached the awful brink and passed it . . . and that, however false and fallen, he had also been his son. “‘The Countess Ilona loves the King, whose indifference tortures her, and whose dominating influence she seeks to flee, but cannot . . .’” Waldemar saw Ilona totter: she knew at last the subtle trap the Premier had spread for her in making her confess her love. “‘I, for my part, love her so madly that my life is unendurable without her. She has told me that, until the King is dead, no other man can win her. She has told me that she has often wished him dead—he is her evil genius. She has told me that “the man who told her he was dead would merit all that she could give him.” She said, when I asked her—“What! his murderer?” “I should not call it murder.” She told me, “When it is done, you shall take his place in my heart”—and I consented.’” Fokshany stood silent, his long pale finger pointing to the words.

“He lies! He lies!” muttered Ilona, as if a strangling hand were on her throat. “He loved me as he says, and took this foul revenge because I would not listen to him. . . . Who dares believe the traitor—the assassin? the calumniator without proof?” Her royal bearing never varied, but her eyes showed the first wavering of despair.

Fokshany turned to her, with that decorum which the circumstances made so grim.

“Countess, when you permit, I will proceed to lay the proof before you.” As he turned the sheet, the one great ruby which he wore upon his hand glared

like the eye of some exultant demon. Ilona cast a final glance towards the couch.

"You will kill the King," she said.

Fokshany looked up, startled, from the written sheet.

"Go on," said Waldemar.

The Premier obeyed at once, secure that he had gained his point.

"I adore this woman, but I do not trust her, although I am putting my life in her hands. She may keep faith, or she may betray me: whichever way it goes, I stake my life against her love. If she betrays me, I must drag her down with me: I will not sink alone. As proof of her perfidy towards the King, I cite the efforts she made to prevent the girl Mara, whom Leonti's sudden death had made suspicious, communicating with King Waldemar or others in time to prevent the plot's success.' Does your Majesty desire that the girl be called to testify to this?" inquired the Premier.

"Enough," said Waldemar, deadly pale. "No more—I cannot bear it. Leave me."

Ilona fixed her eyes upon his face: despair was in the look.

"Then you believe it?"

"I believe it."

"Count Fokshany," she said, turning to the Premier, "I have heard you out, and wish to clear myself. If you will allow me to retire to my apartments, I will show you proof which cannot be contested."

He opened the door to her. She paused upon the threshold, with a last long look towards the King. Waldemar had turned his head away, and his face was hidden in his hands. She left the room with marble calmness.

"I do not know," said the Premier, "what proof you can adduce in your own favour, Countess; but

the only one to save you from arrest is a proof of courage far beyond most members of your sex."

"Count Fokshany, surround my rooms with guards, but let me find the thing I seek for."

"It shall be as you desire. In ten minutes I shall knock."

Fokshany drew out his watch as the door closed, and, as the time expired, entered. He had not knocked: he knew his knock would fall upon deaf ears. She was lying dead before the Ikon.

"'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth!'" muttered the Premier. "Her life for his. . . . No wonder he loved her, with that face and form—and that wild soul, half angel's and half devil's. . . . How did she do it, so quickly and quietly, without one coward shriek or struggle? . . . Here is the vial, but spilt, not swallowed: prussic acid. She inhaled it, then—a subtle way to die! . . . Beautiful snake, if you bit, you were trampled soon into the all-devouring earth! . . . And yet, who knows what complex passions, longings, leanings, battled in her woman's soul before they turned its balance? Who knows, if life had not refused its treasure to her, that the angel, not the devil, in that soul, might not have conquered? And so with you, Vassilio. . . ." Fokshany bowed his head, for in his manner he had loved his son. "I would not have had her less superb—unmatchable as some imperial pearl—since he so loved her. Well, it is over now. So base at first, so brave at last! Farewell!"

Waldemar lay silent, his face still hidden in his hands. The sun was calmly setting, over the beautiful land. On the tumult of his brain, the anguish of a heart to whose faith betrayal is a crucifixion, stole the sweet echo of a sweeter voice, a memory like a message.

"Listen: I will be with you when you suffer; I

will be near when you despair. A day of pain seems everlasting if one does not dream of beautiful to-morrow: a life's unrest seems but a day's if one looks to the eternal calm. . . . I know your weariness, I share your pain ; but beyond it all I see, like a white dawn, reunion, peace. . . ."

Waldemar lifted his face, transfigured.

"Soon," he murmured, like an answer, "very soon !"

What was this sense of rich fulfilment, as he looked upon the sinking sun? Why did he recall glad dawns of boyhood, youth's fair hours, manhood's ecstasies without its agonies? Why did all life's happiest moments throng back smiling, memory-borne on rain-bow wings? Why had pain of body grown as nothing in this glorious new-born freedom of the soul? . . . Fredegonde's face shone before him, like the herald of the perfect future of his dreams: that longed-for loftier life of truth and beauty, infinite love and peace. Gold can buy faith; a pearl turn love's fine balance; a diamond outshine white virtue: and yet, beyond the world, in holy calm, eternal, unimagined, the heaven of purity, the fount of beauty, there must throne a God of Good. The aspiration of pure souls, which lifts sad doubt upon the wings of hope and faith; the invocation to the great unknown Ideal, profounder than prayer's self, was in his heart. Whence this deep peace; the peace of laying down a burden, and of finding rest? Whence this great calm; the quiet of the soul which passes fast the jarring boundaries of the world? . . . Waldemar thought of Czar Lazar on Kossovo, choosing the Heavenly Kingdom; building a church not of granite nor marble, but pure silk and fine cloth of scarlet. He, too, had founded one, neither frail tent nor strong temple, but built of his soul's deep endeavour; self-discipline, charity, kindness, humility, helpfulness, counsel, and hope. Would it be fair enough, pure

enough, sweet with enough of the incense high thoughts and good deeds make, to ransom him at last? Time had been short, and his work was unfinished; his people were still unadvanced, unenfranchised—but that was death's fault, not his own. The sacrifice had been whole and willing, the offering perfect in plan and wish; he had waited, worked, and watched through the vigil; and now, as the sun set on Lazar and Kossovo, might it not set on his life and on him? . . . Night and Death! soft names, not grim ones: secret names for Rest and Peace! How he would welcome them, how he would praise them, Fredegonde's face for his evening star!

Waldemar stirred and looked round him; the chamber was flooded with roseate radiance. Beyond the wedded rivers' shining reaches, the sun was sinking red in aisles of gold. The King rose feebly, left his couch, and, clinging fast to what supports he found, made tardy way across the room. A curtain-shrouded alcove faced the windows; with a shaking hand he drew the glowing velvets back. . . . Rising white in its stainless marble, flushed with ethereal tints of life, Fredegonde's statue shone vision-like upon Waldemar's dying eyes. Chastely draped, with a hand outstretched, but modestly, as if to welcome; marble's peace and the peace of purity blending eternal upon her brow; the beautiful eidolon stood revealed where the King in secret worshipped, confidant of his heart and life as her prototype had been.

Waldemar tottered, and clung to the massive pedestal of the statue. His wound, wrenched by the strain it had received an hour before, had begun to bleed since he had risen. Was this the end, he wondered; had he done with life and pain?—such marvellous peace had stolen on him in their stead! . . . He sank to his knees, unable to support himself erect, still trying to look upward; it seemed to him

her own face, with its living eyes and smile, was dawning on the mists to bid him welcome. . . . He had offered his life, like Lazar, to the Great Unknown Ideal, had fought his fight and perished in the battle. The glow of the glorious sunset seemed, to his eyes, dawn's first flash—new dawn, new hope, new life, new love, the Heavenly Kingdom awaited.

"The kingdoms of earth are but fleeting; the kingdoms of heaven enduring; yea, heavenly realms everlasting . . . Fredegonde!" he murmured, "Fredegonde! . . ."

Dead, with a smile on his face. Dead, with her name on his lips. Dead, with the Great Unknown Ideal he worshipped, at his heart.

. . . "Not dead, but risen."

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